

# Locating Design Anthropology in Research and Practice

## PhD workshops provoke expansion of cross-disciplinary horizons

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**Abstract—** As an emerging field, design anthropology appears to be in the formative stages of establishing an intellectual and disciplinary location, currently caught in the turbulent waters between theory and application, academia and industry, research and practice. While the unclear nature of this new collaboration may be confronting for research students from either traditional academic discipline areas, such as anthropology, or from established practice-based design industries, it does offer the opportunity for investigative and methodological experimentation at doctoral level. The connection between design and anthropology has always been *implicit*; the challenge lies in making it *explicit* and accessible for doctoral students through ongoing education, research and practice.

**Keywords** - design anthropology; design research; doctoral education; cross-disciplinary practice; emerging design fields, participatory design pedagogy, design dialogue

### I. INTRODUCTION

Drawing on experience gained at an international PhD course in design anthropology, this paper will reflect on the apparent difficulty reported by doctoral students in aligning their research interests to a new and unfolding field. An overview of contributions to the course, by practitioners and researchers engaged in emerging cross-disciplinary activities, indicates possible location(s) for design anthropology in doctoral education. A review of the course demonstrates the value of provocative and collaborative team projects that give participants the freedom to explore relationships between design and anthropological methods, theories and practices in a generative and creative multi-disciplinary environment.

### II. RESEARCH PROVOCATION

#### A. Provocation, Participation and Positioning

How can doctoral students analyze, synthesize and incorporate what appears to be an exciting alternative approach to their research when they are unable to identify, locate and apply specific frameworks and methodology from an established body of theoretical work? Participants attending a two-part PhD course in 2010 raised this question in various guises throughout the course; seeking explicit information on the characteristics, location and boundaries of design anthropology as a new area or ‘field’ of research, and guidance on how it might relate to their own investigations. With regard to terminology in this paper,

design and anthropology are recognized as separate established academic *disciplines*. Sub-disciplines or branches of knowledge such as social anthropology or participatory design represent specific *fields* of study within a broad disciplinary frame.

The course organizers were both unwilling and unable to provide a definitive set of parameters defining ‘design anthropology’, the omission both intentional and situational. In large part this reflected the emergent nature of the field as well as the experimental nature of the course. The organizers acknowledged their position at the outset, stipulating in the invitation that doctoral students would be expected to “contribute towards long-term research goals”, including the development of a research agenda for the new field (Gunn and Ingold 2010).

The exploratory approach to content delivery and participant engagement, while initially disorienting for doctoral students anticipating a more traditional academic learning experience, ultimately enabled participants to re-frame their expectations about different forms of doctoral study. As it transpired, the effectiveness of the course material and structure relied on participants suspending judgment on the suitability of design anthropological knowledge or methods to their own research work until the final session.

Collaborative industry-linked projects effectively directed the focus away from ‘what it is’ and towards ‘what it might be’, and provided the opportunity for participants to contribute ‘design *with* anthropology’ thoughts in relation to future research and practice by submitting in a post-course paper (Gunn and Ingold 2010). The paper itself presented as a provocation for constructive feedback and further pedagogical engagement with the organizers, and a valuable tool for post-course reflection to help assimilate learning and re-focus research.

#### B. New Paradigms of Design Research

Meredith Davis, Director of Graduate Education in Graphic Design at North Carolina State University, builds a compelling case for actively seeking new paradigms of design research in order to address the increasing complexity in the scope of design problems and design practice. In her paper “Why do we need doctoral study in design?” Davis observes the contemporary shift in design practice from designing things and environments, to generating experiences and interactions (Davis 2008). Reviewing current institutional limitations and looking towards more

collective, collaborative and inclusive processes of design, Davis identifies that:

“Design is in uncharted territory with respect to emergent systems and many of the current strategies for studying people are neither predictive of, nor responsive to a rapidly changing of new technology and the resulting relationships among people, places and things.” (2008, p. 73)

Investigating the scope and dynamics of design anthropology as an emerging *system* or field of study in relation to doctoral research in design therefore brings with it fresh opportunities for speculation, proposition and debate about new sources of collaborative knowledge. The following sections will reflect on course attendance, in particular the workshop activities that demonstrate potential for provocative and interventional, non-conventional engagement with commercial stakeholders, other researchers and end-users. With characteristics familiar to proponents of the ‘professional doctorate’ in Australia, the course content and delivery reveals possibilities for developing new strategies for blending research, education and practice relating to both academic and industry contexts:

“If the PhD is intended to lead to the advancement of knowledge in academic disciplines, then the Professional Doctorate is intended to lead to advancement in professional practice.” (Green, Maxwell, and Shanahan 2001, p. 47)

As an experienced design practitioner and early career researcher, this discussion on doctoral education in design is from an informed (by professional practice) PhD student perspective. Specifically in relation to emerging areas of design practice, my main interest is in finding new ways to research complex ‘real world’ problems (Fig. 1).

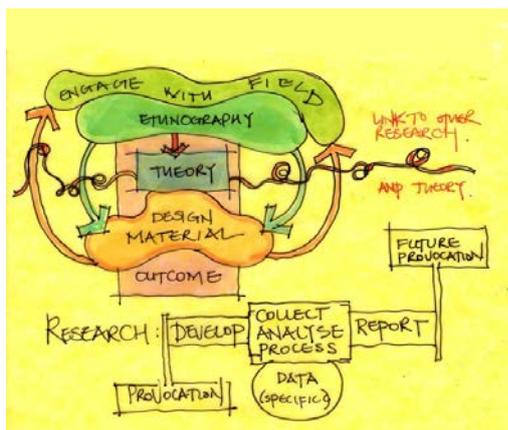


Figure 1. Exploring conceptual relationships (author)

The commentary to follow centres on three key issues; (a) the individual and collective struggle to demystify rhetoric surrounding a new field, (b) the direct engagement with experimental and dynamic learning techniques, and (c) and the value of PhD courses that embrace multiple disciplines and generate collaborative

and inclusive knowledge linking research, professional practice and industry.

### III. LOCATING AN EMERGING FIELD

#### A. Challenging Assumptions

The dilemma experienced by course participants in relation to locating design anthropology was evidenced initially in the broad range of expectations mentioned in participant position statements gathered prior to the course commencement. The lack of clarity on position appears to originate in large part from the apparent combination of two already established ‘disciplines’, design research and anthropology, each with separate organized theoretical and methodological systems (Green, Maxwell, and Shanahan 2001, p. 113). The implication of this apparently straightforward hybrid between two disciplines being; either some aspect(s) of design theory has been grafted to anthropology, or some aspect(s) of anthropological theory has been transplanted into design. However, as highlighted during the PhD course, in order to engineer the shift from implicit to explicit knowledge, it is first necessary to “challenge taken for granted assumptions” (Gunn 2010). Presuming that design anthropology might be located wholly in either discipline, or squarely between both, being the first of these assumptions to change.

#### B. Identity Crisis

The challenge of unraveling the apparent ‘identity crisis’ begins with acknowledging epistemological differences between design and anthropology, and additionally the misfit between design and research (Krippendorff 2007, p. 73). Anthropology has a long tradition of research based theoretical knowledge produced and tested within academia, whereas design research has a longer history in practice and training outside of academia.

Design knowledge is mostly generated through active input from a variety of practitioners engaging ‘in the world’ rather than about it. Bill Green, Professor of Curriculum Studies at the University of New England, (NSW) and his colleagues distinguish between these two different forms of knowledge and knowledge production. Anthropology exemplifies the traditional single discipline ‘Mode 1’ form, still dominating doctoral study in academia. Design research more closely reflects the newer transdisciplinary Mode 2’ knowledge, with a strong emphasis on reflective practice and situated problem solving (Davis 2008; Green, Maxwell, and Shanahan 2001; Cross 2006; Schon 1983; Dorst and Dijkhuis 1995).

“During the 1990’s, the concept of the ‘reflective practitioner’ was fused with allied concepts (and practices) of ‘experimental learning’ and ‘critical thinking’ to form ‘critical reflection’, which offers an intellectual underpinning for Professional Doctorates.” (Green, Maxwell, and Shanahan 2001, p. 46)

For the last century, both design and anthropology, as individual disciplines, have been flexing and

changing in response to social, cultural, technological, commercial and educational pressures. In doing so, each has been subject to emergent areas of research and practice. This continual adaptation has moved the disciplines closer together, to a point where interests or subjects of study overlap, and in addition, the application of emergent research knowledge increasingly benefits industry and professional practice.

“The change is from knowing as contemplation to knowing as action. As a society grapples with increasing and complex change, as its economy struggles to maintain competitiveness, knowing about the world gives way to knowing as practiced in the world.” (2001, p. 37)

This shift began over fifteen years ago, indicating that academic enquiry situated in the ‘Mode 2’ knowledge area is now better placed to address multi-faceted global problems. This supports professional doctorate development and more collaborative and creative ‘in the world’ investigation.

### C. Mapping Human Creativity

In formation, design anthropology emerges out of both disciplines and thus both modes of knowledge. While it may appear that these present vastly conflicting positions, students of both anthropology and design share powerful interests and concerns about human activity in and on, or jointly *with* the world. These human-oriented perspectives are considered as distinct from a focus on object-centred issues (Davis 2008).

Nigel Cross, Emeritus Professor of Design Studies at The Open University, discusses (the discipline of) design in relation to the production of knowledge as the goal or outcome of research, locating the source of design knowledge in “(1) People, (2) Processes and (3) Product” (Cross 2006, p. 100). Similarly, Ken Friedman, Dean for Faculty of Design, Swinburne University of Technology, frames design knowledge in association with four overarching domains: “(1) Skills for Learning and Leading, (2) The Human World, (3) The Artifact, and (4) The Environment” (Friedman 2000, p. 11). Knowledge within anthropology traditionally resides in the “cumulation of human experience in different times and places; the accumulated wisdom, and folly, of humankind” (Keesing 1971, p. 1).

Design anthropology here begins to inhabit the space in the relationship between humans/human experience(s) and, or *with*, design/creativity. However, at first glance, this indicates that *any* human engagement with design fields or design-oriented activities (design practice/action/process/thinking), or *visa versa*, may be included in scope of design anthropological studies. Furthermore, it is widely acknowledged that creativity is inherent in human behaviour and that design is a natural human ability, so from an anthropological position, a relationship with design knowledge is critical to the investigation of peoples’ ability to create, craft and re-shape materials, systems and experiences (Csikszentmihalyi and

Rochberg-Halton 1981; Hendry 2008; Krippendorff 2006). In this respect, study of design *by* or *with* humans, either directly or indirectly within a real world context, is then both design and anthropological in origin.

Design focus, on one hand, with an emphasis on understanding the human world, has led to strong links with user-centred design processes including participatory design and contextual design. Affiliations are also evident with user innovation design (as formalized by Eric von Hippel), which investigates human (‘the user’) interfaces with the designer or design process. On the other hand, emphasis on ‘technology’ has generated links between Human Computer Interaction design (HCI), Human Factors Science (HFE), user interface design and interaction design. These are practices and systems that predominantly investigating how humans (again, “the user”) interface with technology in relation to design and design processes.

In an article titled “Co-creation and the new landscapes of design”, the authors discuss correlations between some of the above approaches with regard to ‘the evolution’ occurring in design research, and changing relationships and roles of key stakeholders (user, designer and researcher). They suggest that implications on the “education of designers and researchers are enormous” (Sanders and Stappers 2008, p. 1).

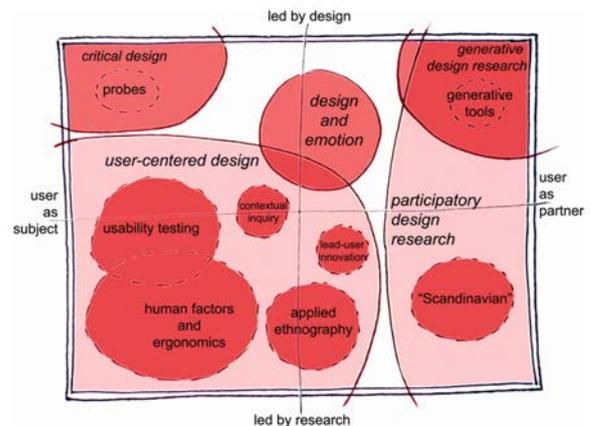


Figure 2. Landscape of human-centred design as practiced in the design of products and services.

Figure 2 (above) is featured in the Sanders and Stappers article and maps the ‘current state of the human-centred design (research) landscape’ (2008, p. 2). Design anthropology does not feature in this mapped terrain, however, based on the above deliberations, and without a more definitive home, design anthropology might be interpreted as the frame of the ‘new landscape’. The article highlights a similar dilemma in the positioning of other new fields, observing that terminology surrounding the use of ‘co-design’ and ‘co-creation’ is unclear, and the words themselves are:

“Often confused and/or treated synonymously with one another. Opinions about who should be involved in these collective acts of creativity, when, and in what role vary widely. On line dictionaries do not yet have entries for [them, and] Wikipedia, the online encyclopaedia, has only preliminary entries.” (2008, p. 2)

Design anthropology is not alone then in experiencing disorientation and apparent homelessness. The following list illustrates the variety of interpretations and current claims on design anthropology territory. Most of the overviews *indicate* (implicit) a beneficial relationship located in the vicinity of the two key disciplines without necessarily clarifying the *actual* (explicit) nature of the relationship or the interpretation of terminology. Design anthropology is (or might be), variously:

- *a discipline*, as in “the discipline of design anthropology...” (Montgomery 2009).
- *an interdisciplinary field*, as in “design anthropology is an interdisciplinary field...” (Tunstall 2008).
- *a trans-disciplinary field*, as in “Tunstall, currently associate professor of design anthropology...said ‘my work has always been trans disciplinary’” (Montgomery 2009).
- *a source of practices*, as in “design anthropology’s intentions are to create hybrid practices” (2009).
- *a practice and theory*, as in “In this space, the practice and theory of design anthropology has emerged...” (2009).
- *an approach to design*, as in “ways in which anthropology could influence the design process...” (2009).
- *an approach to anthropology*, as in “an imaginative, comparative, and reflexive approach to engaging in the processes by which things meanings and persons are constituted” (2009).
- *one discipline within another*, as in “our focus is on anthropology in design” (Sperschneider et al. 2001).  
*a field of study based in one discipline about another*, as in “design anthropology can mean the anthropology of design” (2001).
- *a cooperative approach*, as in “this area is an extension of the user cooperative design approach established in Scandinavia for the development of computer systems” (2001).
- *a system of meaning*, as in “the focus... is on connecting the process of design to the meanings and functions designed artefacts have for people” (Tunstall 2008).
- *a system of operation*, as in the place where “design and anthropology operate between, across and beyond disciplines” (Kivivali 2009).
- *a double perspective*, as in “DA is a point of view: Not *our* (*the designers*) point of view not *their* (*the users*) point of view, but an additional point of view, a double perspective” (emphasis in the original) (Sperschneider et al. 2001).
- *a representational synthesis*, as in “design anthropology represents the synthesis of academic anthropology with the professional practice of design” (Kivivali 2009).
- *an emergent field... differently practiced*, as in “design anthropology is an emergent field and practiced in different ways depending on one’s methodological positioning” (Gunn 2010).

In summary, both disciplines offer doctoral students an extensive range of shared interests and ‘touch points’ centred on human behaviour or ‘action’, human skills, social and cultural systems, and the physical, material and possibly virtual world within which people live and work. The potential for engagement *with* design anthropology as a cross-disciplinary field from other disciplines altogether, such as science, further expands the range of permutations, interpretations and applications possible. Rather than facilitating a narrowing of focus helpful to doctoral students, it provides limitless horizons more valuable to broader design research and education futures.

#### IV. DOCTORAL COURSE IN EMERGENCE

This section first overviews the collective understanding participants brought to the course about the subject matter, based on their individual areas of interest and available definitions of design anthropology by way of context. A brief overview of the course content and structure will provide a glimpse at the activities and topics covered during the course, contributing to, and easing ‘the struggle’. The section will conclude with analysis of both weeks as a learning experience, and insights from group feedback on the PhD course.

##### A. Participants ‘with’ Expectations

The course invite was in itself an attractive provocation. A pioneering international initiative, accessible to doctoral students situated anywhere along the continuum from traditional to innovative methods of knowledge production. Implications for effective application in both academia and industry indicated suitability for those involved with practice-based research as well as theoretical studies. Furthermore, if anything would capture the imagination of research students embracing the search for creative originality in their thesis, it would be the promise of embarking on a new cross-disciplinary and apparently ‘cutting edge’ endeavour:

“This is a radically new area of research that cuts across a wide range of fields of industrial design through human movement studies and ecological

psychology, to sociocultural anthropology.” (Gunn and Ingold 2010)

Promotional material attracted participants from a wide range of research backgrounds and countries, mostly Denmark, The Netherlands and UK, but also individuals from Sweden, USA, Switzerland, New Zealand and myself from Australia. Each of the participants responded to the course organizer’s description of design anthropology as:

“An emergent field concerned with the design of technologies that build upon and enhance embodied skills of people, through attention to the dynamics of performance and the coupling of action and perception... From an anthropological perspective, it resonates with four areas of interest that are generating some of the most exciting new work in the discipline: exchange and personhood in the production and use of technology, the understanding of skilled practice, the anthropology of the senses and the aesthetics of everyday life.” (Gunn and Ingold 2010)

The invite focused initially on doctoral candidates from the established academic disciplines of architecture, design, philosophy, archaeology engineering and anthropology, however the final participant list also included students of physics, computing science, business and management studies. Of the thirty-seven participants, over two-thirds were broadly located in innovation or design-oriented areas of research, to include product design, architecture/landscape architecture, industrial design/engineering, human-centered computing, cognitive science, participatory/experience/interaction design, fashion and design process studies. The remaining participants represented research interests in archaeology, anthropology (to include social and applied anthropology), physics, telecommunications and business. The truly multi-disciplinary cohort comprised approximately equal numbers of male and female and included several pre- and post-doctoral researchers, and quite a number without English as their first language.

Position statements provided by each of the participants during the application process made reference to their fields of study and interest in or expectations of the course. For several with design backgrounds, the course suggested an opportunity for investigating the contribution anthropological theory might bring to design practice, for others it promised insights into the application of ethnographic methods and materials, and deeper or more experimental engagement with fieldwork (Fig. 3). Overall, the enthusiasm for finding new and better ways to study people, their behaviour, and their social and cultural context featured heavily in statements by design-oriented participants. Many were interested in participatory and people-centered design approaches,

and in moving towards more effective stakeholder (to include industry and the end-user) collaboration in the design process. Statements by participants from anthropology and archaeology generally reflected a desire to gain a deeper understanding of the role of design and innovation in past and current realities. Many hoped to find valid and ‘future looking’ applications for anthropology in industry, and ways of negotiating a more active and creative role in the provision and analysis of observations and knowledge about people.

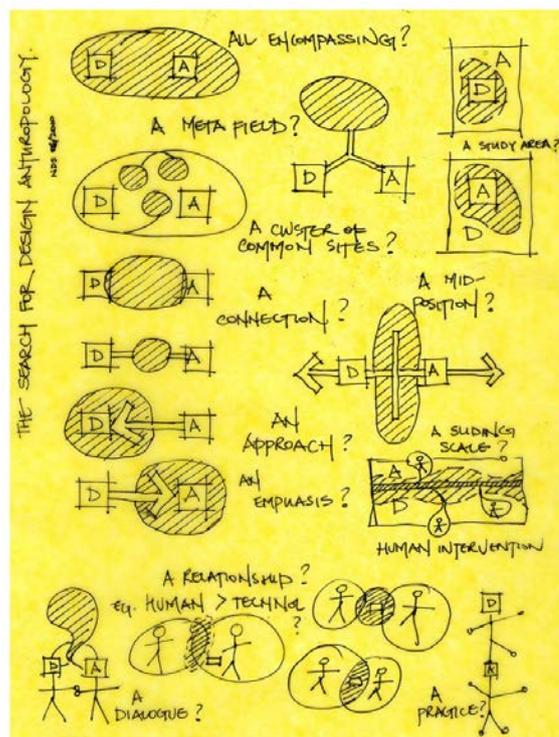


Figure 3. Early search for design anthropology (author)

The diversity of different cultures, research practices and theoretical understandings represented by the participant group, and their wide-ranging expectations, placed a considerable demand on the course aims and objectives. Within tight time constraints, the organizers were simultaneously required to deliver of relevant and variously applicable to information hungry participants, while also creating generative spaces through which to collect ideas, suggestions and constructive feedback to assist in the development of future courses. At a meta-level then, the organizers were engaging *with* participants in a collaborative and participatory research project, a period of reciprocal learning, reflection, experimentation and enquiry about the direction of an emerging cross-disciplinary field.

### B. Struggle for Research Orientation

The apparent struggle faced by many participants during the early part of the course returns our focus to locating the new field within realms of existing ontology and epistemologies. Feedback discussions early on indicated both the need for, and difficulty of,

defining the origin and direction of emergence. Participants wanted to know how their discipline knowledge might move in order to generate study that could be *properly* acknowledged as scholarly and rigorous design anthropology research. Thoughts voiced during the early days centred on whether the discipline of anthropology was embracing design processes and practices to communicate understanding and more effectively contribute to human futures. Alternatively, was design as a discipline seeking deeper anthropological understanding of the world to more effectively engage in practices of participatory and user-experience design?

The following segment of conversation took place at the end of the first week of the course, and illustrates the ongoing difficulty participants had in assimilating the polarities of knowledge and positioning design anthropology. Participant X opened the feedback session commenting how the invitation to the course had been a “powerful call”, and yet even after the first week remained unclear what it was teaching:

X: Structural observation on some of the conversations we have had... If we analyse the play-structure of these two words we have the idea that it is about *an* anthropology of design, or a kind of using anthropological methodologies in design, that is the obvious thing, or we could engage in a struggle... The question I am having is, what if it is neither of those things, a third thing? A non-field that goes beyond, and that is obviously also drawing people in that are neither anthropologists nor designers, such as myself... where I think this would call for a design process in itself, and one with an open ending in which you are using all we know about creating knowledge together... We could be more courageous about it.

Y: Yes because I feel sort of stupid ‘cause after one week I still haven’t got what design anthropology really is – either the two that X just talked about, or one we haven’t really talked about yet... I had hoped after the first week to have a better understanding of what this design anthropology might be and what it might gain me in my projects.

Z: I think that is very true for all of us, but hopefully the point will be that coming together, all these different constellations can allow for all those things, and the inter-relationships of those things. At least, that is how I am managing it...”

Y: Also is there a philosophical basis for it that we are all supposed to agree on or not?

X: Yes! But is this about saying, okay this is not about disciplines at this point, it is about getting some work done and then you start worrying about the disciplines when you have agreed what the work is?

Z: Or this is a speculative and foundational discipline?

X: So here’s the picture (draws on whiteboard):  
Anthropology = Design, so we have either:

- 1) Designers using anthropology, or
- 2) Anthropologist looking at designers

Or we have this last thing, which is-, okay we will use society or whatever, and you have:

- 3) Anthropologists looking at that (society or culture) and feeding into design.

Z: There are even more possibilities.

Rather than help the participants and organizers navigate a path together though the emerging terrain, the first week instead generated more questions than answers. At this point it may be pertinent to provide an overview of the course itself, the content and structure facilitating this process of inquiry, before reviewing feedback from participants at the end of the second and final week to see whether the experience successfully contributed to way finding.

### C. Course Aims and Overview

Hosted jointly by the Department of Anthropology, School of Social Science, University of Aberdeen (Part I: 22<sup>nd</sup> to 26<sup>th</sup> March 2010), and SPIRE, the Participatory Innovation Research Centre, Mads Clausen Institute, University of Southern Denmark (Part II: 3<sup>rd</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> May 2010), the stated aims and objectives of the two-part course were to:

“Challenge conventional thinking regarding the nature of design creativity, in a way that acknowledges the improvisatory skills and perceptual acuity of people. Combining theoretical investigations and practice based experiments in a series of research seminars; the course addresses questions regarding methodological innovation within processes of designing/using things. Studying the relation between design practice and use practice, researchers place emphasis on the creativity of design and emergence of objects in social situation and collaborative endeavour.

Specifically, current anthropological theories concerning institutional divisions between innovation and improvisation, transactions, exchange and personhood will be brought to bear on the form objects take in technological or other contexts giving due attention to the situated nature of processes of production and consumption, and to social form. Working alongside international researchers from academia and industry, doctoral students are asked to contribute towards long-term research goals of expanding understandings of ethnographic practice in academia and industry, and developing a research agenda for the emergent field of design anthropology.” (Gunn and Ingold 2010)

The course organisers participated in the delivery of the seminar and workshop material and maintained a close connection with the participants throughout the

course. They were: Dr Wendy Gunn (Associate Professor of Design Anthropology, SPIRE, Mads Clausen Institute, University of Southern Denmark), Jared Donovan (Post doctoral Research Fellow, SPIRE, Mads Clausen Institute, University of Southern Denmark), Professor Tim Ingold (Professor of Anthropology, University of Aberdeen) and Dr James Leach (Senior Lecturer and Head of Department, Department of Anthropology, University of Aberdeen).

Successful applicants received an extensive reading list prior to the course commencement, and in order to pass the final evaluation, participants were required to attend both parts of the course, complete preparation work, undertake extensive literature study and contribute to group project work. We were also required to submit a research paper, which essentially presented as a tool for collecting considered and feedback on the course by addressing the following:

- Based both on your previous background and training and on your experience of this PhD course, how would you propose to develop research and practice in design anthropology?
- Describe one or more projects that you have participated in, and explain how elements of 'design anthropology' (as presented in Aberdeen and/or Sønderborg) could contribute to that project.

#### D. Course Outline - Part I

The first week at the University of Aberdeen, (Fig. 6), focused on theory, mostly delivered through series of research seminars reflecting on the background readings; encompassing topics such as environmental change, anthropological resources (body of literature and conceptual tools), materials, gestures, craft and skill, personhood and transaction, and utilizing anthropological ideas in industry:

“Deploying a kind of ‘double vision’: both the possibilities for anthropological thinking, and knowing how and where to deploy that thinking, is vital to the design anthropologist’s position as we see it.” (Leach and Nafus 2010)

A few practical exercises such as weaving and ‘path making’ provided brief opportunities for participant interaction during the week. A short final project in mixed discipline groups focused on the rapid analysis of theories and understandings gleaned from a reading of a traditional ethnographic text. Teams were required to create a brief for a hypothetical industry client about the social world within which a radically new product or service could be developed.

#### E. Course Outline - Part II

The second week was held at SPIRE Participatory Innovation Research Centre, part of the Mads Clausen Institute at the University of Southern Denmark, based in Sønderborg (Fig. 6). Presenters focused on exploring “the relation between theory and practice”, again with

research seminars introduced through background readings [1]. Topics included practices of designing and using, engaging with organizations and institutions, creating ethnographic design material and performative ethnography, (Fig. 4). Part II demonstrated greater emphasis on “collaborative team working, co-design, co-analysis, and cross-comparative study”, as promised in the course program. A central multi-faceted study spanned the entire week with organized workshop and studio activities in groups using a ‘cross-comparative project matrix’. The matrix comprised three key themes and three SPIRE ‘participatory innovation projects’ already in progress with industry partners. Participants were divided into primary groups and encouraged to share their research interests with the group and explain how the workshop theme related to the topic of PhD research.



Figure 4. Sample of ethnographic material created in Part II

Over the course of the week, the groups were re-shuffled several times using the matrix to create new configurations of people and topic, and at each change the new group would work on a different aspect of the same SPIRE project. Activities ranged from interpreting ethnographic material already captured in the field, such as photographs, video, and audio transcripts, conducting workshops to produce provocative ethnographic material as a means for exploring design intervention, and studios exercises analyzing the impact of intervention on user-improvisation in transforming organizations and practices. The week culminated in a ‘weaving materials’ exercise, drawing connections between the three themes and across the three SPIRE projects and making practical cross-comparisons. Group presentations of the findings and observations were followed by a session of feedback and reflection on the course.

#### F. Participatory Fieldwork – Part I

The traditional British ‘establishment’ style academic setting for this part, and the style of delivery, predominantly seminars or lectures aligned the course with the characteristics of Mode 1 knowledge. Some of the readings and presentations addressed a more practice-based application of anthropological

knowledge, such as the contribution of anthropologists to corporations; however, the emphasis was mainly on anthropological theory and understanding:

“While ‘ethnographic method’ has come to mean little more than listening to focus groups, or observing ‘users’, academic anthropology offers an imaginative, comparative and robust approach to understanding the processes by which things, meanings, and persons are constituted.” (Leach 2010)

Design-oriented participants chiefly interpreted the final project as an exercise in using ethnographic text as an ideation tool, an alternative source of inspiration for usual processes of conceptual design. In several groups, the anthropology-oriented participants found themselves merely interpreting and expanding on observations contained within the text *for* the designers, rather than working in collaboration *with* the designers to develop a common frame of reference. As a result, participants returned to using the skills and expertise of their design training to make *explicit* understandings and opportunities for the project rather than reaching for a new way of revealing the *implicit* connections between design and anthropology. The final exercise of the week was therefore unable to make progress toward a much-anticipated conclusion to the ‘meta’ discussion of what defines design anthropology (X: “I’m not sure the exercise is good for showing the link between the two”).

While there was no apparent ‘eureka’ moment for participants at this stage, and the atmosphere at the closing session was one of frustration and anxiety about a lack of comprehension (Y: “I don’t get it, so how can I apply critical reflection and rigor?”). There was also firm positive acknowledgement that the material delivered (including the readings) had been rich, varied and thought provoking. Many participants commented on having gained a greater understanding of anthropological thinking and practices, however, a great deal of anticipation transferred to the second part, hoping the content of week two would bring a kind of positioning ‘enlightenment’.

### G. Participatory Fieldwork - Part II

The second week of the course was more closely aligned to the production and analysis of ‘Mode 2’ knowledge. Hosted by a recently established centre within a research institute working with Danish industry and government partners. The high tech building and perceptively experimental atmosphere provided a generative space highly conducive to innovative thinking and creative immersion. Surrounded by researchers working on industry related participatory design projects, it was natural to find oneself curious about the distinctive Scandinavian design approach:

“Always in dynamic changing circumstances, always with the need to involve new actors and new

ideas, as well as new technologies, and always requiring iterative analyses of changing situations and power relations as well as iterative design of technological artefacts.” (Gregory 2003, p. 65)

With this history of continual evolution, it is no wonder that SPIRE has embraced the challenge to explore possibilities for design anthropology. In anticipation of reciprocal learning, SPIRE also embraced the opportunity to discuss their research expertise and experiences, sharing their investigative material on current projects for use in workshops. The diagram (Fig. 5) featured on the SPIRE website, illustrates interest areas within which the centre staff are located. Even here, with design anthropology present in a conceptual landscape of design approaches, the relationship between the people operating in the other areas remains undefined. The entire landscape captured here is simply referred to as a “multidisciplinary research team [assembled]... to conduct these investigations from multiple and contrasting perspectives” (SPIRE 2010).

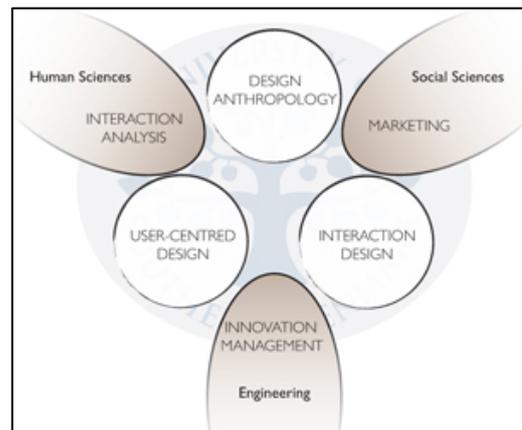


Figure 5. Diagram of research teams at SPIRE [40]

With SPIRE research staff and students engaging closely with participants, and the sense of urgency to generate tangible outcomes within five days, a process of rapid multi-disciplinary ‘peer-to-peer learning’ was evident. The intensity, variety and frequency of group work created generative space allowing individuals to develop dialogue on shared PhD research interests with other participants, and explore ideas about how these might relate to themes provided. Both design and anthropology-oriented students were more able to contribute in a collaborative way to workshop activities than they had been able to with the Part I theoretical discussions. Design training privileged some participants with more effective ‘presentation tools’ for communicating creative and innovative ideas, and creative skills for ‘making’ exercises such as creating ‘provotypes’ from an arbitrary collection of materials (Fig. 4). Activities requiring analysis of ethnographic material were more closely aligned to those with an understanding of anthropological theory.

A final session was opened to all for consolidating thoughts and reflections on the experience and course. Participants and presenters contributed to a summary list recording aspects of value and things that would benefit from improvement. Positive comments included recognizing that the struggle to locate a new field was itself a provocation for expanding cross-disciplinary horizons in order to search for understanding. There was clear identification of strong ‘complimentarity’ between fields; acceptance of uncertainty and flexibility in the way design anthropology could be interpreted, and also evident elements of creative friction during project work between disciplines. The expanded vocabulary and introduced concepts that included provotypes, cultural probes, personhoods, war chalking, and new perspectives on individual research and practice were seen as rewarding takeaway aspects of the course. Interestingly, positives included the opportunity to become a ‘real’ student again, adopting a ‘naïve position’ helping to dislodge or shake embedded expectations. Less positive observations included time management issues, more variation in intensity of group work, and interweaving the readings more closely with the sessions.

While huge progress had been made in grasping some of the possibilities, there remained feelings of disorientation, frustration and confusion about the effective application(s) of design anthropology to individual research questions. It was suggested access to intense one-on-one ‘mentoring’ sessions with presenters/design anthropology staff at SPIRE, would have helped to create a bespoke and workable frame of reference, one to take away and discuss with supervisors.

## V. EMERGING CONVERSATION, EMERGING ACTION

The reflection session highlighted issues with language; how terminology in discussion and documentation, including the readings, contributed to the confusion with positioning and comprehension around the new field. Words such as ‘field’, ‘discipline’, ‘study’, ‘approach’, ‘practice’, ‘method’, ‘system’ and ‘process’ used without careful differentiation and sometimes interchangeably. Words frequently used in *both* disciplines, such as ‘behaviour’, ‘practice’, ‘value’, ‘meaning’, ‘culture’, ‘ownership’ and ‘action’ were understood *differently* by participants depending on their own research or practice backgrounds, and the context of use. Questions were raised about another hybridism, design ethnography, both contributing to confusion, and indicating broader issues on appropriation of words and terms. The interchangeable use of ‘anthropology’ and ‘ethnography’, and reference to ‘design ethnography’ as a separate field or ‘practice’ with its own “methods, theories [and] controversies” (DJCAD 2010). Discussion around the relationship between design ethnography and design anthropology is beyond the scope of this paper, although a useful exercise for

doctoral design students in shaping their research landscape.

Both within and beyond doctoral research, in order for researchers and practitioners to articulate critical themes and promote cross or interdisciplinary work (academic *with* industry), shared terminology and a common understanding of the location, scope, parameters and possible boundaries of a field are critical. Without collective participation, mutual contribution, and focussed discussion, the sharing and creating of new knowledge becomes problematic (Redstrom 2010). Klaus Krippendorf, Professor of Communication at the University of Pennsylvania, addresses the issue of language games, dialogues and the *problem* with ‘discourse’ in design.

- “1. A discourse surfaces in a body of textual matter, in the artefacts it constructs and leaves behind...
2. A discourse is kept alive within a community of its practitioners...
3. A discourse institutes its recurrent practices...
4. A discourse draws its own boundary...
5. A discourse justifies its identity to outsiders... in sum... they are social systems with a life of their own.” (2006, p. 23)

This five-point profile of a discourse is of value in establishing a conceptual space within which the future of design anthropology can further emerge and become an explicit “conversation about everything that could be made to happen” (Jones 1970, p. 73). Considering design anthropology as a connective and connected discourse or ongoing conversation to be kept alive, rather than a field with boundaries imposed by others, opens up the horizons for a more fluid and free interpretation.

Another provocation surfaces: If we are to understand design anthropology as a new conversation between existing disciplines; *what* is that conversation, *where* is it taking place, and *who* is it *with*? Jacob Buur, Research Director of SPIRE and researcher in Innovation Process, in his presentation ‘Anthropology of, for or with: Who do design anthropologists work with?’ reinforced the significance of the relationship (alternatively here read conversation or discourse) between design anthropology and industry/commerce, as well as with academia. Buur further proposed moving anthropological theory into the workplace, using it “as a frame for discussion... [and] as driver for design”. Emphasis is placed on exploring ‘with’ practices; engaging *with* the field, *with* theory and data as design material, and *with* organisations in order to achieve a combined outlook; a double perspective on the world (Buur 2010).

## VI. REFLECTIONS

### A. Mapping Educational Terrain: Design Practice

Traversing between collaborative professional practice and single discipline doctoral study poses challenges for design researchers such as myself used to

engaging with consultants in other fields of expertise during the course of project conceptualization and development.

Originally trained as a landscape architect at Greenwich University, I entered the profession after completing practice experience and Landscape Institute (UK) professional examinations. A seven-year process (closely aligned with architecture training) combined elements of Mode 1 *and* Mode 2 knowledge forms; a vocational design course delivered within a mainly academic environment. The terrain was well defined. The development of expertise through education and experience provided a clear framework for practice; the Institute provided clear guidelines on the usual scope of services and rules for professional engagement, and the market dictated the extend of consultant services in relation to each project.

Developing an interest in more complex multi-disciplinary projects, specifically master planning and urban design work, effectively placed me in a field or sub discipline located between the disciplines of architecture, planning and landscape architecture. Although a somewhat hybridized field even now, the scope of work and deliverables are generally well established either by the client (public or private) or members of the consultant team, or a combination (Fig. 7).

#### B. Mapping Educational Terrain: Design Research

The same clarity of scope and deliverables appears true of the majority of doctoral research programs. Re-entering academia after a lengthy period in private practice I found the most confronting issues I was faced with were to do with the density and depth of language and the vast landscape of theory (realm of Mode 1 knowledge). These are fundamental hurdles to negotiate when becoming a professional researcher “means that you have something to say that your peers want to listen to” (Phillips and Pugh 1994, p. 19). The stages of work (research proposal, ethics approval), research methods, stakeholder responsibilities (student, supervisor, institution) and output (thesis) are well documented, and there are university repositories full of completed theses; the tangible product of three or more years of focused investigation.

My candidacy proposal settled on exploring the premise that humans and design have always had an integral relationship; from the historical development of man as a hybrid practitioner - designer and maker, to the current aspiration driven practices in the home, employing creativity and improvisation on a daily basis to bring about transformation in lifestyle. Like a large number of my doctoral student peers, I anticipated conducting ‘ethnographic’ fieldwork, and found that many of the key authors of relevant literature in design, material culture, creativity and craft were in fact trained as anthropologists (and also sociologists), rather than design. The research trail quickly led to the design sub-disciplines such as participatory design, and to enticing snippets of rhetoric about ‘design anthropology’. The

PhD course invite was distributed on an ‘anthrodesign’ listserv group I had subscribed to, and while dominated by anthropologists, the conversation threads engage constructively with practice based ‘real world’ issues of research application. With only twenty-five places initially offered, I was thrilled to secure one of them and looked forward to becoming seriously enlightened.



Figure 6. University of Aberdeen, UK (left) , SPIRE centre, Alison research park, Sonderborg, Denmark (right). Physical manifestation of traditional academic research approach (akin to Mode 1) and newer exploratory and participatory approaches (akin to Mode 2), respectively.

#### C. Mapping Educational Terrain: PhD Course

At the conclusion of the first week, I felt as disoriented as many of the other participants trying to picture the conceptual model of relations (Fig. 1, 3, 7). The academy context, material and modes of delivery contributed Mode 1 expectations, prevailing as the dominant mode of knowledge production at doctoral level in my own university environment.

Provocation: Mode 1 doctoral knowledge production via Mode 2 student perspective: Take a selection of theoretical positions of a healthy vintage (like matured cheddar), rigorously critiqued, sliced or grated, variously applied, layered on solid fieldwork, grilled thoroughly, garnished with an original twist and presented for examiners to chew on.

Much of the second week was reminiscent of working in a multi-disciplinary design consultancy office coming up to a project deadline when all hands were on deck, and even computer technicians had an oversized felt pen thrust in their fists and provoked: *Colour! Now! Anything!* In fact, to an outsider, deadlines in a design office seem more like a kindergarten full of sleep-deprived children on caffeine tablets; the similarities are rather disconcerting. The workshop or studio activities on the course were refreshingly generative spaces, an opportunity for interactive discussion around a ‘real’ project issues, brainstorming, role playing, improvisation, using model making skills (Fig. 4), and admittedly for sketching with a big fat pen.

With regard to the readings and seminars, as a practice trained designer-cum-researcher, there was a greater sense of clarity about the material presented

when it was linked to the SPIRE projects, or projects conducted by researchers in a company environment (i.e. more Mode 2). Abstract and seemingly elusive concepts were more accessible when delivered as presentations on ‘corporate encounters’, including the work of sociologist (with anthropology training) Nina Wakeford, and the role of anthropologist Dawn Nafus at technology giant Intel Corporation. SPIRE staff presented their work *with* (not for) Danish schools, and *with* dental health providers, making practices visible.

There were observable differences with the disciplinary backgrounds of participants in terms of the techniques aiding comprehension of a new field. Course emphasis on fast-tracking observation and analysis through “collaborative sense-making”, enabled group interpretation of pre-collected data samples (Buur 2010). Some were able to conceptualise design anthropology in terms of expanding applied theory, most, like myself, required applied examples. A workable interchange between participants and ideas moving towards tangible outcomes emerged once the dialogue or conversation became *active* and *visible* rather than theoretical and rhetorical. Sense making *was* finally making sense. Eureka.

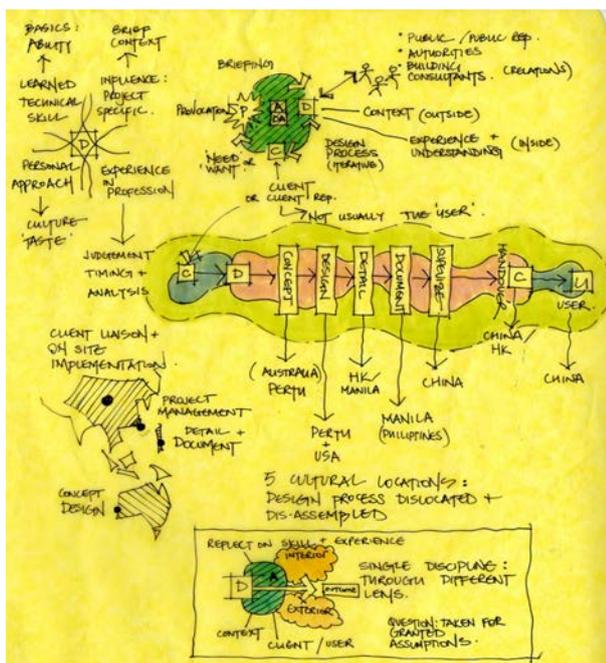


Figure 7. Conceptualising professional practice to explore for design anthropology touch points (author)

#### D. Negotiating Doctoral Research in an Emerging Field

As a ‘sessional’ tutor assisting lecturers in the delivery of undergraduate and masters courses, as many doctoral students do, I bring my professional practice experience, creative/design communication skills (plus big fat pens) and research knowledge to the work. The role is more effective when it facilitates rather than delivers solutions, however this is difficult when students find a topic somewhat intangible. Every year one particular unit explores design *with* ‘eco-mimicry’

and ‘bio-mimicry’, where some ‘thing’ from nature (process, system, element, fauna, flora, etc.), is used to initiate an ideation process. For the first year architectural student, this task nearly always generates a comprehension ‘block’ between theory and application. The problem is mainly one of visualizing the deliverable (graphic and conceptual output), and thus no idea how to get there: What to produce? What is expected? What will pass the dreaded pin-up and ‘crit’? Initially not wanting to limit creativity by providing previous examples made the task too onerous for the students. Providing samples actually opened ‘the conversation’ and gave them the confidence to experiment with ideas. Finding myself as a student on the PhD course, similarly disoriented, I wondered how to apply the new knowledge in a ‘scholarly’ body of work? Would an explorative rather than authoritative thesis pass Mode 1 scrutiny? Certainly my understanding benefited from the opportunity to work *with* SPIRE staff on ‘real’ projects, but application in academic rather than practice-based situations remains a challenge.

Most undergraduate design courses aim to support and encourage innovation and creativity, but after periods in a specific mode of learning or knowledge production, it can be difficult to adjust to an open conversation rather than a statement; as evidenced by the challenge faced by my architecture students straight from school. This scenario is often faced by mature students, and could just as easily occur on entering doctoral education in an emerging field following a period in discipline specific professional practice or even from a traditional single discipline Masters. Doctoral education in design would benefit from introducing more emergent and provocative design approaches *earlier*, and to a *wider* range of undergraduate design courses by organizing cross-disciplinary projects. Meredith Davis supports academic collaboration, but points out that with all good intentions this may not be possible, especially where:

“The faculty who are qualified to provide doctoral education are not necessarily those who are skilled at teaching studios... [however] Access to faculty in other disciplines provides a real advantage when building the student’s network of support... Because design has broadened its scope under new practices, research topics often blur the boundaries between design and other fields.” (Davis 2008, p. 77)

Finding a generative and shared space in the academic environment would allow doctoral candidates such as myself, to question their ‘taken for granted assumptions’ about the role of design research in practice and academia *with* others; academic colleagues, peers, students and visiting practitioners. At doctoral level the acquisition of new knowledge could be as much about constructing and embracing peer-to-peer learning experiences and experimental

investigation techniques, as adhering to established parameters. The common PhD experience appears to be one of isolation and inward deliberation, and yet as designers we operate in a highly complex social world (Phillips and Pugh 1994). Government white papers tell designers we are an essential part of a value 'creative economy', and need to be innovative in negotiations *with* industry partners, institutions and the public. Advice from USA National studies on doctoral education, recommending that PhD programs should 'balance' the single discipline doctorate with a "variety of interdisciplinary challenges", is especially relevant to design:

"In which the body of knowledge is inherently interdisciplinary and well suited to collaboration with psychology, anthropology, sociology, computer science, engineering, art history, communication and media studies, and a number of other fields." (Davis 2008, p. 78)

In order to remain relevant to design practice and wider stakeholders, and to facilitate the pursuit of innovative PhD study, design research should embrace 'self-provocation', probe collaborative and experimental modes of enquiry and actively seek opportunities for the expansion and diversification of cross-disciplinary doctoral education.

## VII. SUMMARY

Attending a short PhD course heavily influenced by the Scandinavian design approach, has provoked thought and discussion relevant to an audience of very diverse research interests and backgrounds, and thus provides a useful model for creating generative spaces for facilitating peer-to-peer learning, and 'with practices', among doctoral students across disciplinary boundaries.

Reflecting on the difficulty of intellectually and conceptually locating an emerging field such as design anthropology through traditional paradigms, it becomes clear that in order to build new knowledge and understanding, doctoral students need to engage *with* hybrid discipline interests, contribute to unfolding discourse and generate new conversations. The future position and effectiveness of design anthropology in relation to doctoral education, practice and industry will only be revealed through continual discussion, application, and investigation.

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Please note, the opinions and views put forward in this paper in no way intend to miss-represent the course

or any of the parties involved. The intention is solely to provoke lively discourse... Any cheese *with* that?

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