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THE ELEMENT OF SURPRISE: AN INNOVATIVE APPROACH IN ART EDUCATION

ABSTRACT

This article examines the role that the element of surprise plays in the implementation of the art curriculum at the Higher Education level. My critical analysis and evaluation of the subject matter are based on the outcomes of three case studies and the resulted exhibitions, organised and realised in the South African politico-economic and socio-cultural framework. Consequently, the research develops in the context of three most significant streams of policies in Education: socio-cultural inclusion policy, multiliteracies in education and the needs of the Fourth Industrial Revolution for soft skills. The aim of the study is twofold: to demonstrate an appropriate climate of interaction among students and educators in the Visual Arts and Design discipline and to propose different teaching strategies for the enhancement of skilful planning, accurate decision taking as well as analysing and synthesising creative ideas under unfamiliar and challenging circumstances.

Keywords: Element of surprise, innovation, linear, multiliteracies, soft skills, inclusion policy

1. INTRODUCTION

As a noun, the term “surprise” has different meanings, such as “an unexpected or astonishing event”, a “shock” or a “complete wonder”. As usual, the given meanings do not distinguish between positive or negative connotations of the term surprise (Webster, 1981: 2301), yet its synonyms shock, astonishment, astound, amazement, disclosure, revelation, wonder and many others, include eye-opener. The element of surprise as an “eye opening” and self-discovery process, indirectly leads an interested seeker to Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex*, the tragedy that has been thoroughly analysed and largely discussed in many disciplines, with special attention to the symbolism of Oedipus’s self-inflicting blindness. The reality was too horrific for him to contemplate (Sophocles, 400 B.C.).

Though less relevant, the emotional association of the term surprise with the eye-opening mental function of the element itself has equipped me with the necessary motivation to constructively apply a different and



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challenging approach to teaching and learning skill development in the practical application of my educational project in my Visual Arts and Design education classes.

My present study forms part of my broader research project on innovative approaches in art education and the development of teaching strategies through constructive teachers-learners communication channels. It demonstrates how meticulous planning, applicable at various aspects of creativity in the Visual Arts and Design discipline, can strengthen soft skills consciousness among students, the importance of which has been stressed by Saavedra and Opfer (2012: 10-12). By challenging existing conventional restricted ways of thinking, the heuristic and experimental approach has demonstrated the great importance of openness in reasoning for the development of artistic creativity (Valerie Oliver, 2017: 71).

Furthermore, in the framework of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, **innovative thinking** is a crucial factor for the adoption of change, the development of different attitudes and the promotion of new skills. Since, as Rogers (1983: 168–174) states, any innovation, material or otherwise, has been associated with reluctance towards the introduction of a new unfamiliar element or change of any conventional way of thinking, a precise and well-defined understanding of the novel subject matter is recommended.

However, in art education the process of exposure and adaptation is equally – if not more important – than the outcome itself, since most innovations take place through a process of testing and applying new ways of thinking and reasoning. Furthermore, the expected successful learning outcomes in arts and design education cannot be reached without an appropriate climate of interaction among students and educators. The greater the mutual trust between the two parties, the stronger the motivation for adaptation and implementation of a new idea.

2. WHY THE ELEMENT OF SURPRISE IN ARTISTIC CREATIVITY?

The lack of recognition and progress of art at all levels of the modern education system has been discussed and attributed to serious “neglect” and incapacity of the educators themselves to demonstrate art achievements on an “empirical level”. Based on a combined philosophical theoretical framework of existentialism (Sartre, 2003), power-knowledge interaction (Foucault, 1984) and social behaviour (Bandura, 1982), Oliver (2017: 69, 70, 84), demonstrates the pedagogic and social value of art education and practices. Her empirical findings promote the importance of action research, ideally based on a well-adjusted integration of art theories with practices in teaching and learning processes.

In reference to teaching and learning interaction, however, no matter how interesting a teaching subject may be, or in which discipline (Yule, 1987: 150–155), repetition, drilling exercises and class routine, in general, may discourage, block or raze any creative ideas and – even worse – interrupt the relevant creative design process at a most crucial stage of its development. Having identified the importance of creative thinking, Odendaal (2016: 84–85) explains you need to stimulate motivation to enhance artistic creativity. In this context, he proposes practise through reproductions, photographs, drawing projects, or inviting professional guests and **planning field trips** (my emphasis).

In my case, based on professional empiricism to counteract the predictable, expectable, anticipated and, even better, **unsurprising** aim of any design process development, one of my strategic approaches has been the **element of surprise**. In my long teaching experience

and field, this element has proven to be the most challenging factor. It may, however, be a powerful tool in creative thinking as it stimulates the synthesis of ideas, the quick and accurate assessment of possibilities and the making of appropriate decisions in terms of **time**, **space** and **available information**. Hence, due to the unfamiliar nature of my message to my receivers, the communication and the process to be followed had to be carefully planned to ensure the positive acceptance and successful outcome of my innovative idea.

In the framework of promoting multidisciplinary and multiliteracy approaches in Visual Arts and Design (Steyn, 2019: 156–172), my communication process has been based on different forms and fields of artistic expressions and activities. Literature is one of them. Following Aristoteles's *Poetics*, the design of the plot in any work of fiction rests heavily on generating curiosity and suspense, by which narrative and causality maintain the sequence of events structurally in a well-balanced unit (Cuddon, 1986:513). Therefore, with reference to the sequence of events interlocking causality with happenings within a novel, a play or a film, the element of curiosity is essential as the receiver of a message tries to find answers to questions such as “what? who? where? when? why?”

From my point of view, the element of surprise can provide motivation for “rigorous examination”, accurate focus (in response to the pressure exercised on the brain in terms of time and space) and quick decision-making. This article aims to demonstrate the importance of the surprise element in receiving, accepting, assimilating and diffusing change and innovation through quick thinking, as well as creative and critical thinking. The focus of the study is placed on the outcomes of the innovated approach as illustrated in three consequent exhibitions. Aspects of the exhibitions were discussed in class.

3. CRITICAL FRAMEWORK

Ideally, in arts education, new ideas, original creations, new orders of things and different approaches are welcomed, tested and, if successful, adopted; thus, through education, enhancing the social and cultural value system individually and collectively. Yet, anything “new” and “innovative” is often very difficult to be accepted, adapted and modified. Machiavelli's words in his *Prince* (1513) never cease to be relevant: “There is nothing more difficult to plan, more doubtful of success, nor more dangerous to manage than the creation of a new order of things.”

In line with the new directions and necessary reforms in South Africa, the design education national curriculum planning defines critical and creative thinking, self-discipline and leadership as crucial life skills. In this framework, teaching should inspire and train learners to be inventive, innovative and capable to strategise as leaders, but also to act “as team players” (DBE 2011:8).¹ Creative thinking in arts education, therefore, by definition, calls for alternative ways of reasoning and new patterns of possibilities when solving problems of creating and delivering. In discussing the 21st century innovative teaching requirements, Saavedra and Opfer (2012:11–12) among others, propose the development of thinking skills in terms of: 1) exposure to multiple disciplines, such as “native and foreign languages, hard and social sciences, mathematics and the arts”, 2) relevance of subject matter and 3) the transfer of learning through active class participation. According Saavedra and Opfer (2012:11–12), “creativity is not a fixed characteristic that people have or do not have” but rather an incremental

1 Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) 2011. Saavedra & Opfer, “Learning 21st-century *skills* requires 21st-century *teaching*”, in *New Styles of Instruction*, October 2012, 8-13.

one that can be creatively developed through proper encouragement, newfound knowledge and a clear understanding of innovation and innovative approaches.

In his pioneer work on diffusion innovation, Rogers (1983:163–167) identifies five sequential stages of the innovation-decision process:

1. Knowledge = the gaining of some understanding of the nature and relevance of the proposed innovation. Rogers (1983:164) notes that, “[k]nowledge occurs when an individual (or other decision-making unit) is exposed to the innovation’s existence and gains **some understanding** of how it functions” (my emphasis). In my case, to lead to successful outcomes, some understanding has to be controlled through a direct, practical, inclusive approach. I consider this line of mental activity as the most appropriate for a better and more accurate knowing as well as a better applied cognitive tactic, especially in the field of education.
2. Persuasion = the affective or personal feeling that directs the assessment of the innovation towards its acceptance or rejection. In agreement with this viewpoint, Williams (1969: 7–13) argues that the receiver has to have a fair amount of cognitive information to develop an attitude towards a new idea. This is the point whereby, I trust, curiosity and anticipation about an unrevealed aim to stand up against established prejudices, existing stereotyped images and predisposed opinions.
3. Decision = the act of choosing between totally adopting innovation as the best way forward or completely rejecting it due its unfamiliar features. For a positive decision-making stage, I depended on the well-studied practical application of my plan and the speedy sequence of the stages.
4. Implementation = the point where the mental activities of the previous stages are set to their practical materialisation and the problem-solving process entailed by innovation. In arts education, in the context of productive communication between educators and students, this step is quite significant because it defines the point at which a theory integrates with reality, abstract ideas are put into use and mentally structured plans take their concrete form.
5. Confirmation = the stage that mainly refers to continuation or discontinuation of innovation after its adoption. From an educational point of view, this step can be particularly important, provided the ongoing course for testing and finalising the designed product has been properly guided, well-controlled and critically assessed (Steyn, 2019:156–172).

According to Rogers (1983:163–167), these series of actions affect every decision about an innovation whilst the relevant process occurs over time: “Diffusion scholars have long recognised that an individual’s decision about an innovation is not an instantaneous act. Rather, it is a process that occurs **over time** and consists of **a series of actions**” (my emphasis).

On the other hand, social media communication, multi-channelled information and high global demand for socio-economic changes, constantly increase the number of demands for innovative and different ideas. In this context, though from a different point of view, Cassim (2013: 190–201) challenges the traditional design education in South Africa, advocating for greater engagement with the contemporary social, economic and environmental problems of the country through a more human-centred design thinking approach. According to Cassim (2013: 191–192), to deal with the 21st century changes and complexities, traditional educational approaches should be challenged and developed through integration with the introduction of new ways of thinking. Designers should “traverse traditional disciplines” and

“articulate new areas of design” for the sake of innovation, especially given the uneven South African social map.

As for the realisation of any creative idea, its development process consists mainly of three stages: Idea-Process-Creation. The design process is commonly understood amongst teachers as a single linear process. According to Tim Brown (2009:9) linear thinking is about sequences and not as creative as the synthesis of developing thinking based on the designer’s personal mind map. In the definition of the term linear, the *Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary* includes the following sentence: “Students do not usually progress in a **linear** fashion!”(my emphasis). Indeed, in the context of the three stages organised by the teachers, which Ohemeng-Appiah labels as identify-design-make-appraise, students are expected to follow these steps “sequentially and diligently” in their projects. In addition, the linear view of the design process hinders learner creativity as “learners do not have the freedom to explore design solutions using their own ideas or methods” (Ohemeng-Appiah, 2014:52).

In this context, Ohemeng-Appiah (2014:9, 52) does not hesitate to use expressions such as “hinders creativity” or lack of “freedom to explore”. Briefly, referring to Hill (1998), Williams (2000), Mawson (2003) and Rowel (2004), Ohemeng-Appiah rejects the existing design process as rigid and limiting the development of creative skills of the learner, suggesting the need for an alternative pedagogy or approach. In this framework, Dwyer, has developed the modern conceptualisation of critical thinking (2017:17–18), which is based on Romiszowski’s distinction between “reproductive” and “productive” skills and adapted to contemporary technological needs (Romiszowski, 1999:462). The former is used when students follow instructions and merely copy or simply duplicate the planned work, while the latter refers to “productive” skills, through which learners consider the instructions, adapt their skills accordingly and create something new. When students are given a brief to follow, the relevant on-going process is tightly controlled by the educators and followed by a “reverse process”. Consequently, “practical skills will involve ‘productive’ skills that follow standard procedures or plans, as opposed to ‘reproductive’ skills that involve also applying standard procedures, plans and strategies” but from another point of view (Romiszowski, 1999:462). In short, Romiszowski makes a clear distinction between “productive” and “reproductive” skills by replacing the approach of following by the act of application, which, as he argues, allows for a greater and more direct engagement of creative problem-solving.

Notwithstanding the importance of Rogers’ process and the need for reform and changes in the traditional thinking discussed above, in the context of the time pressure imposed by technology and the high demand for soft skills, decision-taking-processes are constantly being challenged and forcing human thinking to act fast and at the same time with great efficiency. To satisfy the relevant needs, **time** needs to be managed differently and controlled supervision based on relevant structure is needed. Future designers and teachers need to work under different circumstances and requests where in the proposed stages of the above model of acceptance and confirmation, fast **thinking** becomes crucial. In this context, after being tested, the **surprise element** is expected to be an important and valuable factor.

4. METHODOLOGY: THE CREATIVE ROLE OF THE “INFINITY” STAGE

Considering the creative process as most crucial for the final production, to reach the desired outcomes, I have divided its course in three different phases (Figure 1). I have labelled the middle stage B, which is the one between the planning (A) of a requested design product and

its creation (C), as the “infinity” process, thus defining it with an emphasis on the ongoing course of making and testing the relevant product before its final presentation (or the solution to a pre-problem). The role of the “infinity” stage in the development of creative ideas and their realisation is important in the sense that it aims at an infinite number of constructive relative attempts and an improved planned continuation. This infinite stage-approach has proven its validity in practice, first because it secures the coordination between stage A and C, and second, because it accommodates the element of surprise in terms of risk-taking. This is an important factor for successful outcomes in the context of the design teaching-learning targets (Steyn, 2019:156–172).



Figure 1: Three basic stages of the creative production process

Figure 1: This plan is based on the proposed three versions of the Designing Process (Steyn, 2019:163).

Option A: The planning stage.

Option B: The infinity stage. This is an ongoing “infinity” process between the planning, making and testing stages of the design product.

Option C: The creating stage.

In the above context, our research question is: how can “the element of surprise” pedagogically become a constructive factor in the development of a different line of creative and critical thinking of the design process?

In the process of design development, in opposition to the “expected” outcome of the design process, the unexpected experience at a given moment of the process, cannot only narrow the existing distance between theory and practice, but hopefully also render the designing process an unforgettable learning experience. In this context, I applied my theoretical premises in three different Visual Arts and Design classes in the framework of three representative case studies. Consequently, whilst demonstrating the negative and positive aspects of the “element”, the following three case studies also promote the “element of surprise” by way of an alternative approach or tactic to teaching and learning. In all three cases, and in terms of constructive communication between teachers and students, my approaches had to challenge two deeply imbedded human sentiments, namely:

- a) “We” and the “others”
- b) “The comfort zone”

Both states of mind are powerful enough to impede social inclusion and cultural interaction by promoting societal prejudice, social marginalisation and cultural exclusion.

5. THREE CASE STUDIES

In the framework of the realisation of the “end-product”, all three case studies introduce the “element of surprise” as part of the design process, albeit at different stages of each corresponding process. In case study 1, the “element of surprise” was brought in **before** the execution stage while in case study 2, the “element of surprise” was introduced **during** the execution stage. In case study 3, the “element of surprise” functioned as an “eye opening” factor, **after** the execution stage, that is, when the design and artworks had already been exhibited.

5.1 Case study 1

Pre-surprise stage:

Art and Design education students were given the task of finding problems in the everyday classroom for the purpose of creating meaningful solutions to the relevant problems. During the process, students had to brainstorm all the possible challenges and issues a teacher might face in a classroom environment, write them down, do relevant research and share their ideas and findings with their peers. Once such problems were identified, the students were grouped accordingly. Once in groups, a brief was introduced whereby each group had to create a product that would solve their chosen problems.

Element of surprise:

As part of the design process, the groups were asked to compose a detailed step-by-step plan of their designed solution or product. The first part of the work was handed in for evaluation and when I returned their assessed work, the “element of surprise” came as a “shock”. As planned, I inter-exchanged the different groups’ concepts, notes and drawings and told each one of them to carry on with the execution of another’s designed product. The crucial factor at this point was to indicate to the future Art and Design teachers, the steps leading to the final designed solution **without** revealing the solution or product itself.

The “element of surprise” was a real challenge for the involved groups as I took them out of their comfort zone (Ohemeng-Appiah, 2014:12; Flowers, 2010:16). I admit that I felt strongly for their justifiable emotions, as they were reluctant to depart from their personal inspirations and designs. Yet, once they understood the aim of the exercise, they accepted the challenge as part of the “interpreting” process for the enrichment of their creative and critical thinking skills, through the analysis of other groups’ concepts, notes and drawings (Steyn, 2019:166–167). In line with Alexander Romiszowski’s division of “reproductive” and “productive” skills, this exercise also led to further and more creative design solutions resulting from the opportunity presented to them to practise their critical and comparative thinking in interpreting, assessing and reproducing one of the other’s work.

The importance of this case lies in the fact that, by allowing risk taking and flexibility in the design process, the “element of surprise” resulted in different, quality wise improved products compared to what the original plans were set to produce.

5.2 Case study 2

Pre-surprise stage:

Case study 2 was realised in the context of the South African socio-cultural and educational policies of awareness, anti-discrimination and inclusion. This time, art education students had

different opinions about artistic aesthetics, while relative stereotypes and prejudices were tested and productively challenged. Thus, to challenge the notion of “aesthetic appreciation”, students were required to create artworks that could be experienced through different human senses. Their artworks would then be exhibited² to raise awareness about the blind and visually impaired.

During the design process, students worked towards producing artworks mainly based on the tactile sense³. In other words, regarding the conventional concept of blindness, whereby artworks can be experienced and appreciated only and simply through touching. The function of any other sense is thus excluded. In the resulting artistic creations, my most interesting observation was the general lack of empathy. Conscious of the Fourth Industrial Revolution needs for soft skills and of “empathy” and higher order thinking⁴ (Saavedra & Opfer, 2012: 10-12) I continued to execute my plan with increased confidence and faith.

Element of surprise:

This time, the students were surprised with a challenge just before the “execution stage” of the design process. They had to revisit their brief and redesign their final artworks, but from another conceptual viewpoint. To experience the emotional thinking of “empathy”, in other words, the core of their task, a prearranged visit to a school for the blind and visually impaired was organised. The students visited the visually impaired and blind learners and attended an introductory lecture on different eyesight problems. Shortly after, they were taken by the “element of surprise” when in pairs, one blindfolded and the other assisting, they had to find their way through the school passages, relying heavily on their partner’s guidance and their own acoustic and tactile senses. Each couple had to switch roles afterwards. This personal involvement seemed to overcome barriers between “we” and the “others”. The students experienced empathy with the daily challenges of people with visual impairments. Most importantly they were forced to depend on other senses and were driven out of their “comfort zone”. After their eye-opening encounter, the students’ initial ideas, artworks and designs changed to an improved artistic expression of deeper understanding and real empathy.

5.3 Case study 3

Pre-surprise stage:

In case study 3, which was done in collaboration with my colleague, Ms Delene Human, art education students received teaching morals, ethics and censorship in Visual Arts. In conjunction with the university’s launch and host of anti-discrimination week, they required students to form groups and create artworks or posters dealing with controversial issues, including race, gender, religion, culture, abuse and other.

Element of surprise:

During this very week, the relevant art works were exhibited, challenging the public to interpret the students’ controversial messages. The students were unaware that the public was also allowed to react freely and spontaneously to these messages through direct interaction and

2 The exhibition took place on 24 October 2018, available at: https://www.up.ac.za/faculty-of-education/news/post_2734033-i-shut-my-eyes-in-order-to-see-annual-art-exhibition

3 For an analysis of the relationship between vision and touch, see Lauwrens (2019: 333-338)

4 <https://medium.com/@Workato/what-skills-will-thrive-in-the-fourth-industrial-revolution-61149634d356>
<https://www.psychalive.org/honesty-empathy-higher-order-and-thinking-moral-development/>

engagement with the artworks. Obviously, the notion to intentionally permit the public to interact and even vandalise the artworks contained the “element of surprise”. For me it also meant “taking a risk” as I did not know what the result would be. I questioned whether the use of risk-taking activities was always justifiable as a means to enhance student learning and dealing with life realities?

The answer was given at the conclusion of the whole experience. The initial, very unpleasant but understandable emotional reaction of the students was soon followed by their complete understanding of the task and the utmost importance of its motive and aim. They were especially content that their works would not be wasted, since they are to be preserved for future relevant empirical insights and future teaching and learning courses.

6. CONCLUSION

In the framework of creative thinking and problem solving in Visual Arts and Design courses, this article has challenged the traditionally established and never-questioned value system in arts. At the same time, it has demonstrated ways whereby humanity and technology in teaching and learning Design, Arts and Crafts can interact in a well-structured and well-balanced way. Indirectly, it has illustrated a better formation and articulation of creative ideas, which through relevant analysis and accurate assessment, in terms of time and space, can lead to proper decision-making through skilful and, most importantly, quick, adaptation and fast performance. Personal reflections have been included for the sake of direct empirical information from a teacher’s point of view, regarding the value and application of an innovative teaching strategy.

My findings have mainly been drawn from the three concluding exhibitions, whereby impressions, emotions and sentiments were artistically and most eloquently illustrated through various sensations beyond the sole imagery means of communication. The “element of surprise” was a vital factor in inspiring the art education students through excitement. The eagerness and anticipation should equip them with flexibility and the ability to cope with unpredictable real-life situations as well as sharpen their soft skills in the context of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. As an alternative teaching and learning tactic, the “element of surprise” has inspired and strengthened the art education students’ understanding of risk taking, which has often been disregarded in the design process.

I believe that this study is relevant and contributes to the development of innovative creative thinking, problem solving as well as a well-balanced integration of human values with technological innovations amidst concerned and fast developing communities.

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