A Box of Delights

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In December, I was fortunate enough to attend a conference that drew together an interesting collection of school and university teachers, researchers, administrators and others concerned with current practice and future developments in design and technology. I find it to be invariably true that whenever I attend these events and then reflect back on them from the perspective of a week or so, one or two presentations (and their key ideas) shine through, leaving an indelible impression.   On this occasion, that deep impression was left by a double act, who seemed (between them) to be making a straightforward, but profound, point.

Although they didn't say so, (probably because they are not from the UK) the point in question is highlighted in our NC2000 in the *Importance of Design and Technology Statement*, as follows:

Design and technology prepares pupils to participate in tomorrow's rapidly changing technologies. They learn to think and intervene creatively to improve quality of life. The subject calls for pupils to become autonomous and creative problem solvers, as individuals and members of a team. They must look for needs, wants and opportunities and respond to them by developing a range of ideas and making products and systems. They combine practical skills with an understanding of aesthetics, social and environmental issues, function and industrial practices. As they do so, they reflect on and evaluate present and past design and technology, its uses and effects. Through design and technology, all pupils can become discriminating and informed users of products, and become innovators.
(DfEE 1999 p15)

This is a challenging vision for us to try to live up to, but it has been an important step forward for our description of why design and technology is important in the curriculum. But the recent conference has highlighted for me some distinctions within this text. Specifically, it has focused my attention to the difference between creative problem solving and intervening creatively to improve the quality of life.

Many of the conference presentations devoted time to problem solving, using the term almost synonymously with designing, and proposing all kinds of interesting new ways of enriching design and technology practice in this area. But one presentation in particular illustrated some quite different thinking, from the opposite end of the design and technology spectrum.

The word 'delight' made an appearance, and the designing activity was cast not as a functionalist pursuit of 'solutions' to 'problems', but rather as a celebration of the many ways in which designers can excite, entice and delight us.

I began to see the distinction as a bit like the old aphorism about a glass being half full or half empty. The very idea of 'problem-solving' starts off with the half-empty downer of 'problems' and 'difficulties' that have to be circumvented or somehow managed away. By contrast, the idea of delighting someone, suggests bubbling-over playfulness and puts pleasure on the front foot, challenging us to do our imaginative best to bring joy into someone's life.

The specialists in emotional manipulation (writers, artists, musicians) know this territory well and have played on it for centuries. Monteverdi toyed with our emotions in the sixteenth century, as did Mozart in the eighteenth and Taverner in the twentieth. They knew/know that a change of key upwards - at this moment, with this theme - will uplift the listener, and that a change into a minor key - at just this moment - will create tension, tenderness and maybe even sadness. The literary and visual worlds have had their own expert emotional manipulators.

Designers now increasingly and explicitly explore this emotional territory, and naturally the design literature has a proper label to attach to it in the product world in which we operate - emotional ergonomics – and it is easier to exemplify than to describe. The satisfying 'ker-thunk' as the door closes on a luxury car, the smooth rich feel (and smell) of a

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Louis Vuitton briefcase, and the sensuous pleasure of the 'plunk' of the cork being pulled from the bottle. Interestingly, as screw caps for wine become more commonplace (not least because of the world shortage of cork) designers are trying to find ways to build the same cork-pulling pleasure into the current crude functionalism of the screw cap. Good products serve more than a function. They enrich and delight.

This emotional territory is not typically at the forefront of our teaching in design and technology in schools. Whilst it would not be uncommon for design and technology activities to be launched with reference to satisfying the needs of the client or user, it is rarely the case that emotional needs are prioritised. Functional priorities might perhaps be seen as easier to get to grips with. A good door-handle must (just?) open doors, and a good CD carrying case must (just?) contain and protect its contents. But since all products do – inevitably - have an emotional content, even when we try to ignore it, what would happen if we tried to accentuate it?

What would the steady-hand-game look like, and how might it be different, if it had to be designed specifically so that it would take users by surprise and make them laugh? What would the CD rack have to do, and be like, if it had to make the mere act of extracting and replacing a CD pleasurable / fun / tantalising / ingenious / engrossing? In short, can we factor in a little delight into design and development activities?

I recognise that some will argue that this is just another kind of problem solving, with a slightly tweaked interpretation of the word 'problem'. But I think it goes deeper than that, and that there is a very real difference (at least of tone) between solving problems for clients and delighting them.

And interestingly, the distinction is captured for us in the opening sentences of the *Importance of Design and Technology* statement:

- *to intervene creatively to improve the quality of life*
- *to become autonomous and creative problem solvers*

These are not synonymous statements, one being a semi-redundant re-statement of the other. Rather they are complementary statements, the former one being an extension of the latter one. In design and technology, it is one thing for us to seek to develop creative problem solvers, but it is quite another thing – and a much more demanding thing - for us to develop young designers with the gifts and skills of enhancing the quality of life. This is the world of delight and desire, and I am indebted to John Williams and Shaun Wellbourne-Wood (the double act I referred to earlier) for bringing it so sharply into focus. Anyone wishing the receive the details of the presentation can contact John at **p.j.williams@ecu.edu.au**

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References
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