The Value of the Social Sciences in Online Design Education in Light of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Bio:

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought into sharp relief many issues of democracy, socio-economic inequality, state accountability, and development, all of which have an impact on every aspect of public and private life including education. As teachers of the social sciences in an art and design institute, we are acutely aware of the economic and public health consequences of the pandemic for the present and future of our students. Our students are entering a world undergoing radical and unpredictable transformations that will affect them both as practitioners and as citizens. Thus, this paper asks the question: is there a space for the social sciences within design education after the pandemic? If so, can stimulating social science courses be offered in an online mode?

Drawing on examples from our own experiences of teaching at the Srishti Institute of Art, Design and Technology, Bengaluru in both online and face-to-face modes, as well as some reflections from our students, this paper argues that the social sciences play an important role in enabling students to develop as critical and sensitive practitioners and empower students with the critical thinking skills to understand social change. Given the limitations of the lockdown and the physical distancing norms that stemming the spread of the pandemic requires, some challenges do present themselves in the teaching and learning of the social sciences. However, these challenges can be addressed in course design.

The paper suggests that thoughtful teaching of the social sciences can empower students with the tools to make sense of the present crisis and begin imagining new futures.

Introduction

In this paper, we draw on our experiences as social science educators trained in History (Srijan) and Women's/Gender Studies and Sociology (Jyothsna) to explore what value, if any, the social sciences may have for design students. While we cannot speak with the same authority about other social science disciplines such as political science, economics, human geography, and law, not to mention interdisciplinary fields such as environmental studies, critical management studies, and business studies (to name a few) that could fruitfully contribute to design as well, we suggest that we might draw on some examples from teaching courses based on History, Sociology and Gender Studies at Srishti Institute of Art, Design and Technology to examine this question within the specificities of our disciplinary backgrounds. We also discuss the lenses and methods through which our disciplines investigate the world as well as the habits of mind that they foster and how these might empower students as artists, designers, and citizens. These lenses and methods might to some extent overlap across different social sciences but we base our argument on Gender Studies, History, and Sociology in this paper. Also, we might not be able to do full justice to the variety of issues thrown up by the present COVID context, but we attempt to discuss some issues of equity and democracy that it raises and how social science courses might help students understand them better. Towards the latter half of the paper, we discuss some of the limitations and possibilities thrown up by online education which has been forced upon us by physical distancing norms and practices.

Mona Mehta and Raghubir Sharan, in their commentary "IITs and the Project of Indian Democracy" (2016), argue that the Indian Institutes of Technology were envisaged as directly involved in addressing issues of equitable development and deepening institutions for democratic and participatory citizenship in independent India. Their establishment was informed by the debates on development that occurred in the nationalist period between a Gandhian skepticism of narrow 'technicism' and a Nehruvian belief in the importance of big technology in development and progress. The Humanities and Social Sciences (HSS) departments in the IITs were created to inform and strengthen this debate so that future generations of engineering students could critically reflect on the ethical and sociological dimensions of their role both as (elite) engineers and citizens in a developing nation.

Unfortunately, Mehta and Sharan argue, the IITs have failed to live up to this promise with HSS departments becoming largely marginalised and corporate placements being treated as the capstone of the engineering course. They argue for a recognition that "science and technology are not per se committed to the concerns of equality [which] is not to take an anti-technological position that sees technology and human good as inherently antithetical. Instead, this recognition is the starting point for making a case for bringing the goal of technological progress within the ambit of an egalitarian society. (2016: 13)" It could be similarly argued that design, in and of itself, is not inherently committed to either human good or ill, but that it is the ethical commitments of reflexive designers which orient their practice towards democratic and humanitarian goals. This paper will argue that the social sciences play a vital role in this regard.

Adopting the Disciplinary Lenses of the Social Sciences

Contrary to popular views, the pursuit of sociological knowledge is not necessarily a normative project (although it can be a basis for one), but one that seeks better to understand relatively familiar social phenomena and problematize common sense perceptions of the world (Berger, 1963). It enables one to understand the relationship between an individual's biography and larger social arrangements (Wright Mills, 1959). More recently, in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, sociology has been concerned with how individual actions can both recreate and undermine/change the structures of society (Giddens, 1989).[1]

Sociology developed in the 19th century within the context of modernity and deepening commitment to values of liberty, democracy, individualism, and equality. Early sociologists attempted to understand the effects of industrialisation, urbanisation, rational bureaucracy, and the growth of the free market economy. Their preoccupation with questions of equality, democracy, progress, and the relationship between the individual and society continues to influence the discipline. Thus, an engagement with sociology can sharpen design students' ability to question and critique taken-for-granted assumptions about society that social actors tend to hold in their everyday lives. This critical ability plays an important role in enabling them to ask how they might design systems, services, products, and experiences that are contextually relevant. As mentioned earlier, the project of sociology is not a normative one but it is nevertheless a useful framework from which to start engaging with normative questions. For design students, those could include: whether they have broader social responsibilities as designers and, if so, what the social value of their designs might be; or whether their design is equitable, culturally appropriate, and supportive of marginalised livelihoods.

Unlike Sociology, Women's Studies is a normative project. It developed first as an interdisciplinary field and later (as its theoretical frameworks and methodology developed) as a discipline in the 20th century, from a critique of the masculine bias of existing Social Sciences, Humanities (and Sciences) and in close relationship with women's activism, for political representation, livelihoods, equality at work, and against violence. As Women's Studies evolved the concept of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) emerged. Kimberlé Crenshaw first coined this term to draw attention to the double oppression of Black women based on both race and gender, but the concept came to be used extensively across the discipline to draw attention to the convergence of different forms of oppression such as class, race, ethnicity, sexual identity, religion and age, with gender. Intersectionality is an important lens for the social sciences enabling us to see the complexities in an individual's or group's access to power and privilege.[2]

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[1] Indian Sociology emerged around the time of independence and early sociologists were perhaps acutely aware of their upper caste/middle class privilege and access to education. Prominent sociologists of that period, including G. S. Ghurye, S. C. Dube, and M. N. Srinivas, were trained under British anthropologists. They had a strong motivation to move away from a textual model of the world and towards empirical research. It could be argued that the discipline's emergence in the 1920 and 30s, when the nationalist movement was also developing alongside, infused its practitioners with a liberal, rational, democratic, and egalitarian spirit. The early sociologists contributed both towards knowledge about caste, class, family, kinship, and social change in Indian society as well as towards the development of methodological perspectives and techniques. Critiques of the discipline emerged later from the feminist and Dalit perspectives.

[2] The concept of intersectionality enabled feminists to understand some of the unique concerns of sexual minorities.

This appreciation of complexity is important to understanding social context for design and also for responsible and critical citizenship, as argued later.

When it comes to history, for the student of design, attuned to looking ahead into the future, looking back on the past may seem counterintuitive or even a distraction from the practice of design. However, history is not an exercise in studying the past for its own sake; it is actually about situating the present in the context of the past. What this means is that any historical enquiry undertaken is shaped by the location of the historian in the present and the issues that animate the present. That is why generations of historians have been able to study the same subject meaningfully without becoming repetitive. The subject may be the same, but the questions that are asked of it keep changing not just across generations but also across different historians of the same generation. To design students, then, any brief that they encounter opens up the possibility of exploring the present through the past that produced it. For history is the study of change over time, or diachronic change. And the reason historians study change is that it allows them to understand how the present was arrived at and how even the present itself is nothing more than yet another point in time through which an ongoing process of change is unfolding.

This is an exercise that Srijan had attempted in the very first course that he taught at the Srishti Institute in early 2017. Called *Interrogating Identities*, he opened the course by asking students their answer to the question "Who am I?" and asked each of them to come up with three sentences about themselves beginning with "I am…" and ending with something that is a marker of identity like nationality, gender, caste, and so on. Based on their answers, in the following weeks, he took one marker of identity a day and tried to introduce them to how that marker of identity has evolved and what it might mean today.

Adapting the Methods of Social Sciences

In general, exposure to the social sciences brings a level of criticality and rigour to research. Research includes the location of suitable sources to address the enquiry being undertaken, evaluating those sources for their credibility, drawing relevant data from them, and analysing different types of data so as to draw valid inferences and embedding them in a coherent and compelling narrative.

Design students tend to undertake research in response to a design brief before embarking on the actual work of creating and iterating prototypes. This research might rely on both primary and secondary sources of data. Due to the explosion of information on the Internet, they need to develop the skill to assess the credibility of information, understand and appreciate the values behind citation norms and practices, and synthesise and analyse different sources of quantitative and qualitative data. Both history and sociology offer valuable methods for doing so.

At Srishti, participant and non-participant observations, long-form qualitative interviews, and oral histories are an integral aspect of design research. However, it is important that students understand that these methods need to be undertaken with care and rigour and with attention to ethics. Both oral history and women's studies offer valuable ways of understanding ethics and obligations to research participants, appropriateness of covert and overt research, forced

participation, and the ethics of representation (in text and image). Students also need exposure to the different methods of analysing data from these exercises. An exposure to sociological methods enables an understanding of sampling frames and techniques and, therefore, being aware of the limits of the sampling techniques one might employ is also valuable. Similarly, exposure to a historical method like source criticism can make students aware of how qualified any claim about the past needs to be and, therefore, how suspicious they should be of any historical claims that are asserted with certainty.

One concern that both of us have, based on our experience of seeing design students present their design projects, is that they often use the vocabulary of Social Science methods (terms such as ethnography, oral history, qualitative interviews) without a full appreciation of the intellectual rigour and ethical integrity required in applying these methods, which can diminish the overall value of their design explorations. Therefore, giving design students a good grounding in Social Science methods is important.

An important skill that is learnt from from the social sciences is the ability to draw valid inferences and to synthesize and analyze different sources.These skills that can be adapted fruitfully not only to design research but also to many areas of daily life and is particularly useful when dealing with the 'infodemic' as discussed later.

The ability to construct a creative, compelling and credible narrative about one's research is also a critical skill for designers because it helps them better justify to themselves and to clients and users the why and how of a product or service. Importantly, constructing an argument or narrative is an important aspect of one's communication skills.

These skills that Srijan had tried to introduce to students through a course titled *The Afterlives of the Tiger of Mysore* in early 2018, which used Tipu Sultan, a particularly contentious historical figure in India, especially Karnataka, as a case study for examining primary sources and synthesising them into a narrative with a point of view. While he could not get most students to engage with the sources, one student's submission stood out because she changed her stance about Tipu Sultan based on an examination of the sources that had been prescribed. Although the stance she eventually took was contrary to Srijan's own stance, she was able to demonstrate the skills associated with historical research and, as such, ended up with the highest grades in the class.

Cultivating the Social Sciences' Habits of Mind

Arthur L. Costa and Bena Kallick (2008) define "habits of mind" as a set of dispositions or intellectual resources that we draw on when confronted with an intellectual or practical problem. The sixteen habits of mind that they identify, including persistence, empathy, a capacity for awe, flexibility, questioning (and problem posing), gathering data through different senses, are generic in nature and not associated with any specific discipline. However, we would argue that

individual disciplines engender certain specific habits of mind through their theoretical and epistemological concerns.[3]

The student of Sociology, for instance, might learn to appreciate cultural diversity and difference and engage with divergent points of view. Women's Studies provides frameworks for emancipatory attitude and actions, for engagement with questions of justice and equity, and while the discipline is most concerned with women's position and experiences, it enables a commitment to equity across class, caste, and other hierarchies as well. It enables students to identify inequities within social institutions and processes and thereby to reflect critically on questions of equity in their own design projects as well as in their current and future lives. For instance, when both male and female students in Jyothsna's course on *Gender and Power in Organisations* began to understand gender inequities in wages, it sparked a conversation about men's responsibility in narrowing the pay-gap and the specifics of what individual men and organisations could do in this regard.

Social Science courses often address fallacies in popular opinion. In Jyothsna's course on *Inequality and Difference in Contemporary India*, students raised the common (and fallacious) argument that India's demographic composition is likely to change in coming decades due to high birth-rates amongst Muslims and comparatively lower birth-rates amongst Hindus. Many expressed surprise when confronted with information that birth-rates across the population have not increased over the last two censuses and that the proportion of different religious groups in the population has remained more or less steady. Some indicated that while they had been uncomfortable with the Islamophobia of the above argument, they did not have evidence to challenge it. This led to a discussion of the importance of sourcing credible information not only as practitioners but as responsible citizens.

Research in history education, i.e. how history is learnt and taught, especially in schools, has found that the study of history has the capacity to cultivate certain habits of mind that have been described as "historical thinking" (Lévesque and Clark, 2018). It has been argued that historical thinking can cultivate an understanding of five Cs among students, namely change over time, context, causality, contingency, and complexity (Andrews and Burke, 2007). What this means is that the study of history can make students conscious of the universality of change in the understanding the past and, by extension, the present; the centrality of context to identifying and understanding that change; the causality that emerges from the contexts that produce change; the contingent nature of the events that take place and, therefore, the likelihood of alternatives that were considered but did not come to pass; and finally the complex nature of phenomena. This five Cs framework is also valuable within sociology and possibly other social sciences as well. These habits of mind are key to understanding phenomena in its totality, and without sufficient understanding, any attempt at an intervention is likely to be inadequate.

Beyond the 5Cs, though, historical and sociological thinking engenders healthy scepticism towards sources that promise information useful for one's enquiry. And scepticism has been found to be the need of the hour in the era of the "infodemic" where information is

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[3] Sam Wineburg (2003), for instance, argues that educators must communicate the habits of mind that their disciplinary training has imbued in them to their students so as to enable the students to consciously develop these habits.

overwhelmingly abundant and available a click away, but the capacity to evaluate information for credibility is scarce (Breakstone et al., 2018).

Historical thinking has, therefore, been the subject of one of my recent courses, titled *Thinking Historically*, that I had offered last year. Among the exercises I attempted in class, one was evaluating the reliability of a video, released by the BBC, depicting large-scale protests in the Kashmir Valley after the abrogation of Article 370 of the Indian Constitution on August 5 that had been dismissed as fake by the Indian government. Most of the students were able to determine fairly that it was genuine based on clues available in the video itself, a task that was akin to how historians evaluate the credibility of a source they encounter.

Online Learning of the Social Sciences During the COVID Pandemic

Some of the challenges of online learning during the pandemic are common across disciplines: rapport building between teachers and students, equity in access to the Internet, stress and anxiety. Nearly all countries across the world have reported an increase in violence against women and children within the home. It is possible that even young adults are experiencing physical and psychological violence or conflict with their parents and other family members which could affect their engagement in learning. Additionally, many female educators are particularly vulnerable to psychological stress from varying levels of domestic violence or from trying to balance professional, household, and care responsibilities. However, an indepth exploration of these issues would be beyond the scope of this paper.

Assuming that all students have equal access to digital resources, Internet facilities and bandwidth, the possibility of primary research is still constrained by the pandemic. Physical distancing and moratoriums on travel require reimagination of primary research methods to bring in more online tools. Students might be encouraged to undertake discourse and content analysis of online media or use social media (Skype, Facebook, Zoom and Whatsapp) for research. However, they need to be sensitized to ethical issues in using social media. Social media is still evolving and since it is often used as a tool for surveillance it is important that students understand its ethical and political dimensions.

There are also some social spaces that are not easily accessed through digital means and, for now, these are likely to be beyond the reach of the students. Understanding that the pandemic and lockdown mutes many stories of vulnerability and deprivation and yet trying to access these stories through other means (social and conventional media, interviews with activists, media persons, scholars, artists and designers within and outside the institution) is important to developing a student's understanding that the current crisis affects different classes, communities and groups differently.[4]

Given the explosion of easily accessible digital archives, containing primary sources earlier available only in physical archives, the prospect of facilitating courses that allow students to learn the historian's craft is quite promising. While it is true that the primary sources available online are only a fraction of what is available in the world, and the sources that might emerge

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[4] Understanding intersecting axes of vulnerability during the pandemic and lockdown is important to developing as critical and empathetic practitioners.

from researching in the field are now no more available to the industrious historian, what is available online is sufficient to create courses that can introduce students to how to go about searching, evaluating, synthesising, and interpreting sources online.

In a thesis project that I just finished facilitating, which continued through the first months of the pandemic, a couple of students drew on digital archives available on constitution-making for their projects. One student mapped how the concept of fraternity in the Preamble of the Indian Constitution was differently articulated in different members of the Constituent Assembly in the late 1940s to understand what it meant then and how it has evolved since. She did this to develop a card game designed to make players aware of fraternity. Another student drew on the same Constituent Assembly Debates to map what was said about caste and untouchability back then and how that evil was sought to be eradicated. She contrasted that with the caste practices and some forms of untouchability still prevalent in society and even in her own home through a series of artistic explorations.

Long before the pandemic forced people online, historians and students alike had turned to the internet as their first stop for historical research. And studies have found that students are particularly vulnerable to misinformation online (Breakstone et al., 2019). The way out of this morass of misinformation is for students to cultivate historical thinking. But, historical thinking, as it has emerged in the physical classroom, is not adequate for online research. And the move to an online classroom is an opportunity for historical thinking to be tailored to the needs of students who, despite being digital natives, remain naïve about ways of quickly and reliably assessing the algorithmically produced information that they encounter (Wineburg, 2018).

The pandemic is thus not a time for history education to await a return to the normal from the "new normal" that we find ourselves in, but to leverage the availability to digital archives to design courses that make history – amongst the oldest of disciplines – the newest tool to deal with the pandemic of "fake news" online. While Srijan had attempted this with the exercise about evaluating the video on protests in the Kashmir valley mentioned earlier, more such exercises need to be built into a course and courses need to be specifically designed to equip students in evaluating information reliably online.

The present moment has raised a number of serious concerns regarding equity, democracy, individual rights and liberties, and citizenship: news stories of "migrant" workers travelling hundreds of miles on foot during the lockdown with many deaths along the way; of sexual assaults on young girls in institutional care-homes; of increasing domestic violence and child abuse during the lockdown; of children struggling to keep up with school work due to poor access to digital devices and Internet facilities; and of a breakdown in public and private health systems in the face of the pandemic are the realities in which we offer our classes. As educators, while we might be concerned about the mental health of students regularly confronted with these issues, one way of enabling students to cope is by giving them frameworks that help make sense of the present moment. Another would be to place the present pandemic in the context of the pandemics past from where many of the interventions such as physical distancing, hand washing, and mask wearing come. It is important to do so in a way that engenders hope and resilience or at least helps overcome despair.

Conclusion

This paper has tried to demonstrate the value of the social sciences in design education through the disciplines that we are trained in and that we have tried teaching the habits and methods of to students of design. Based on our own experience of teaching in a multidisciplinary design institute like SMI, we have found that some students share our assessment and find some value in what we offer in the classroom as well. The fact that there is a place in the design curriculum for us to teach the habits and methods of these disciplines demonstrates that our institution too finds value in the social sciences.

However, now that design education is forced to move online and might stay there in the foreseeable future, what role the social sciences can play in the digital design curriculum has to be delineated. While we have shared some suggestions about what that could look like, what it will actually look like depends on the decision makers of design education in higher educational institutions. Our only submission would be that the social scientists working in these institutions be made active participants in the making of such decisions so that the digital curriculum retains some of the value that the social sciences have offered and can offer to design students even online.

Were they to be excised from the curriculum as extraneous, on account of the constraints of online learning, we might just end up having students with consummate design skills but little understanding of the world in which these skills would need to be deployed.

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