

Uncertainty, reflection, and designer identity development



Monica W. Tracey and Alisa Hutchinson, Instructional Technology Department, College of Education, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI, USA

Uncertainty is a defining quality of the design space and it stands to reason that designers' personal attitudes toward uncertainty may influence design processes and outcomes via cognitive, affective, and/or behavioral channels. Individual attitudes and behavior patterns related to uncertainty may constitute a critical element of designer identity, which represents the synthesis of knowledge, action, and being. This qualitative study examined how graduate students in an instructional design course reflected on their experiences and beliefs regarding uncertainty. Participants were more reflective when discussing a general experience with uncertainty than their current attitudes toward uncertainty in design. Findings support the use of narrated reflection in design education related to uncertainty and identity. Implications for design education interventions and design are discussed.

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Professional identity has been conceptualized as the synthesis of knowledge, action, and self, requiring not only the acquisition of expertise and skills but also professional ways of being (Dall'Alba, 2009; Tovey, Bull, & Osmond, 2010). From this perspective, students in professional education programs need to establish a sense of who they are becoming as a professional – and imagine who they might be – as the context for the development of the knowledge and behaviors that are manifested via the professional self (Dall'Alba, 2009). For design students, this means that foundational learning (i.e., what design is and what designers do, both in general and discipline-specific terms) should not be seen as an end in itself but should instead be used to facilitate the establishment of a preliminary and personal sense of what it means to be a designer. For design educators, this raises provocative questions: What designerly ways of being might be most useful for the initial cultivation of designer selves? And what instructional strategies and experiences might be effective in giving students the space and resources to explore these ways of being in service of identity development?

Corresponding author:
Monica Tracey
monicatracey@wayne.edu



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As part of a long-term, design-based research project on design education, reflection, and professional identity, this study seeks to address these questions and contribute to emerging discourse on identity development in design by examining how graduate students in instructional design explored experiences with uncertainty using reflective writing. As a ground for our findings we will first discuss the role of uncertainty in design as well as pathways by which it may influence designer ways of being. We will also briefly outline the relationship between professional identity development and reflective writing in order to provide a rationale for incorporating this instructional strategy in design curricula.

1 Uncertainty as a defining feature of design

Uncertainty has been generically defined as a lack of adequate knowledge about events that may occur in the future or that may have already occurred but have not yet been revealed to the subject (Bar-Anan, Wilson, & Gilbert, 2009; Rosen, Ivanova, & Knäuper, 2014). This is consistent with everyday usage of the word: when we feel sure about a particular situation, we believe we can accurately predict what will happen next, while perceptions of uncertainty infuse the anticipation of events with doubt. It is typically thought people experience uncertainty as an aversive condition that they are motivated to reduce or eliminate (Bar-Anan et al., 2009). Uncertainty is also a defining feature of the design space, which is concerned with ill-structured or wicked problems that can be clarified and understood only through speculative attempts to solve them (Buchanan, 1992; Cross, 2011). As designers try (and fail) to develop solutions, they gain valuable insight into the nature and boundaries of the original problem (Dorst & Cross, 2001) and thus reduce uncertainty in the design space.

Given the importance of uncertainty to design, it seems a likely candidate for exploration by design students who are establishing preliminary designer identities. Based on research with industrial design students, Tovey et al. (2010) identify uncertainty as a ‘threshold concept’ in design education – or one that holds the potential to open up a new pathway of understanding that may be otherwise elusive and is necessary for forward progress in the discipline. Threshold concepts are thought to support transformative learning at both the personal and conceptual levels, an experience that is indelible, integrative, and bothersome in a way that is motivating rather than limiting. For Tovey et al. (2010), tolerance for design uncertainty as a threshold concept emerges ‘the moment when a student recognizes that the uncertainty present when approaching a design brief is an *essential*, but at the same time *routine*, part of the design process’ (p. 6). Once this threshold has been crossed, the path can then be opened for students to examine how they personally navigate the uncertain design space in service of their individual design practices and ways of being.

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