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## Editorial:

# Schön's design inquiry: Reinvigorating the quest for a pragmatist epistemology of practice

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Forty years ago, Donald Schön (1983) argued forcefully against technical rationality—the view that practice is merely applied theory—as the foundational perspective for understanding expert professional action. Drawing on the pragmatist philosopher John Dewey's theory of inquiry (1938), his alternative pointed to the possibility of an epistemology of practice, i.e., a theory of how knowing emerges in action. Grounded in a form of what he referred to as 'design inquiry', this epistemology relied on the idea of 'reflection-in-action'—a powerful merging of thought and action, means and ends within the performance a specific task or activity (1983, pp. 68-69). Reflection-in-action, he suggested, "arises momentarily in the midst of a flow of action [then] disappears, giving way to some new event, leaving in its wake, perhaps, a more stable view of the situation" (Schön, 1992, p. 125).

Though now four decades old, Schön's vision still raises questions for the field of design studies today. While reflection-in-action continues to hold conceptual appeal, it remains difficult to research directly and still awaits the formulation of methods/methodologies capable of tracking its instability in the midst of wider flows of activity. Equally, as Schön himself, pointed out in later work (e.g. Schön, 1992; 1995), the epistemology of practice project remains unfinished.

This track invited authors to respond to these latter challenges and develop papers that engage with the classical pragmatists in order to deepen the project that Schön started. There was also the suggestion that contributors might compare Schön's design inquiry with conceptions of design science (e.g., Simon 1969).

We received 11 submissions in total, of which 6 were selected. Surveying the contributions, we were here struck by the deep engagement with the original writings of the pragmatists in evidence, as well as the breath of novel insights and proposals. The final selection highlights



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the centrality of the pragmatist perspective to Schön's reflective practice (Schön, 1983; 1992; 1995), with all authors explicitly drawing on and relating their work to classical pragmatist philosophers. Beyond Dewey, reference is made to Charles Peirce (e.g. on abduction and inquiry), George Herbert Mead (e.g. on identity and dialogue), William James (e.g. on process and experience), Mary Parker Follett (on creativity and integration) and Jane Addams (e.g. on practice and experimentation). A number of the track papers also explore the methodological challenges of studying the reflection-in-action inherent in designing. However, our suggestion that contributions might explore design inquiry-science comparisons, received no responses. We believe that this suggests the challenge of working through the complexities of the Schön-design science relationship remains too daunting for many.

Below, we briefly summarize the final track contributions, point to fruitful moments of connection, and thereafter highlight opportunities for future scholarship.

In terms of the general alignment of the contributions we divide the track into two groups. The first group (Chiapello and Bousbaci; Stompff et al.; Hawey) engages more with the epistemological aspects of relating Schön's Design Inquiry (1983) to the wider pragmatist canon and specifically to Dewey's theory of Inquiry (1938).

Here, Chiapello's and Bousbaci's "It's complicated: Dewey, Schön and reflection-in- action" presents a detangled overview of Schön's model of 'reflection on reflection in action' with its various components illustrated and nuances drawn out. What results is a clearer understanding of Schön's contribution as set against his pragmatist roots.

"Touch ground: introducing design inquiry in higher education" by Stompff, Joosten, Prince, Claessens, Geurts, and Köppchen argues Dewey provides an epistemological foundation for design thinking. The authors conclude that reflection-in-action tempts students and coaches to cope in potentially unproductive ways. Instead, they suggest coaches aim to cultivate "a joint practice and a community of learners" in order to ameliorate challenges.

"A Theoretical Model for Studying Design Inquiry in a Real-World Context" by Hawey proposes a five-dimension model for the ethnographic study of design inquiry and 'design-like' inquiry, which allows for the consideration of reflective practice alongside other social and contextual concerns.

The second group of papers (Watson and Dorst; DelSesto; Fjaer Lindland) explores more inclusive methodologies for enacting design inquiry through reflection in action.

"Pragmatism, Design and Public Sector Innovation: Reflections on action" by Watson and Dorst explores the practice at a design research center, and its inspiration drawn from pragmatism. The authors highlight the potential for further engagement with pragmatism for public sector innovation by design.

"Remaking the social: Dialogical, creative, and cooperative capacities of thought at Hull House" by DelSesto argues Jane Addams' approach to inquiry offers an alternative model to

dominant and extractive research efforts that marginalize and harm communities. This article highlights the need for dialogue across differences for those seeking more inclusive and equitable approaches to design inquiry now.

“Re-framing design and designers: studying design processes through a pragmatist lens” by Lindland argues that cognitivist-inspired linear process models of design thinking fail to capture the core of designer practices and collective moments of creativity as situational and relational. In contrast, she draws on G. H. Mead’s work on meaning-making developed through gestural conversations and Dewey’s aesthetics to show how social identities contribute to exploring possibilities and limits to what it is.

Reflecting on this final selection, three key insights are drawn out, which in turn point to areas for future research. First, we believe that, together, the contributions demonstrate the continued relevance of Schön’s work for the field. What emerges most strongly here is the need for a more critical examination of Schön’s *Design Inquiry* (1983), as well as a deeper engagement with the wider pragmatist paradigm. Links traced to Peirce, James, Parker Follett and Addams enrich the general reflective practice offer and there are still more insights to be gained as we discuss below. Second, following on our call for methodological work for studying design inquiry, the links drawn to its social aspect, in particular to the concept of communities of inquiry stands out, aligning with the “co-” of much current design activity. Third, the paucity of research comparing design inquiry and design science points to the need for more in-depth work, extending the contributions of Dorst (1997), Buchanan (2007), Meng (2009), Schaathun (2022) and others.

Beyond the need to relate design inquiry and design science, we propose that from here, a possible line of investigation might focus in on the related themes of process, practice and the social via pragmatism.

With regard to process, methodological work going forward could explore novel ways to study process by building on the process perspective afforded by pragmatism (e.g. Wegener & Cash, 2020; Amacker and Rylander Eklund, 2022; Wegener & Lorino, 2021). This might draw reference from the work of William James (e.g. 1909).

In relation to practice, pragmatism allows for new approaches to studying designers’ sensibility and creative practice (Rylander Eklund et al., 2022). It equally allows for a careful understanding of the potential role of creative practice in knowledge production (Dixon 2020; Dixon and French 2021). There is also more work to be done drawing out the value of Peirce’s contributions for design, particularly which regard to abduction as well as his original presentation of inquiry, which predates Dewey’s (Peirce 1992).

With regard to the social, as the papers in this sub-theme highlighted, pragmatism brings forth the social nature of design as co-design, with the central concept the community of inquiry (Stompff et al; Hawey). From here, there is the opportunity to extend further and explore the potential value of relating Dewey’s democratic vision to the design domain (e.g. in

relation to policy; see Dixon et al. 2022). Equally, beyond Dewey, the work of George Herbert Mead, Jane Addams and Mary Parker Follett holds the potential progress design's social/experimental frameworks. Here, Mead offers a unique perspective on the roles of empathy, dialogue and habits in interaction (Mead, 1934); Addams provides special insight into stakeholder engagement and the potential of collective action (1910, 1902); while Parker Follett's work lastly draws compelling links between creativity, experimentation and power (1924).

Building on the insights of the track contributions, such work would continue to extend and progress the quest for an epistemology of practice as first proposed by Schön. As has been demonstrated, this is an inherently pragmatist project and, accordingly, aims first and primarily towards practical impact and real-world accountability (see e.g., James 1975/1907). The challenge then is to deliver on this requirement; to bring insight to bear in relation to the needs and concerns of the wider design and design studies communities. Thus, it is our hope that the positions and agenda presented here may mark a further, important step towards the fuller integration of knowing in doing in design, whereby by design knowledge can be *known* as a practice

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