

The Uselessness of Play

Year: 1995
Level: First Years, Autumn Semester 1
Unit: 33062 Foundation Studies 1
Duration: 7 days
Dates: May 22, 25, 29, June 1, 5, 8, 15

Origin

I had, at this time, on long term loan from a friend of mine Rik Rue, a Chinese scroll, around 2 metres long, with 12 ideograms inscribed upon it: Chinese 'characters', (text in the form of pictorial symbols each denoting an idea). I had always been curious about the meaning of this text, it was obviously saying something, but what exactly. I proceeded to attempt a translation and in the process came to quickly realise the difficulty of this task and the relative intractability of each character to simple equivalency within the English language.

Premise

Whilst many previous projects had inferred a connection with 'lateral thinking' as an approach conducive to creative enterprise and ingenious solution, to this point, even though I was aware of what I believed to be the loose tenets of such an approach, I had never actually engaged directly with the primary texts of Edward Debono; so in preparation for this project I read a number of them, drawing quotes in particular from his "Use of Lateral Thinking", (which I found most useful).

Students were presented with a copy of the 12 characters as a text considered indecipherable and asked to attempt a 'translation' into an 'artwork' of some kind. The ancient form of the pictorial characters were no longer in common usage, finding relevant reference material to facilitate translation, proved elusive in any definitive sense, leaving the participants with a highly speculative arena within which to operate (lateral space and latitude to imaginatively play with).

The project offered the opportunity to have a close look at what exactly the activity of 'play' was and the state of 'playfulness'. Both notions are often made light of in comparison with the more studious state of 'seriousness', as being activities of lesser import associated with childlike behaviour (something amusing, 'fun', a form of light entertainment of little consequence). Debono critiques this perception and argues strongly for importance of play as a sophisticated creative activity that advances human insight, capability and understanding. He asserts, paradoxically, that it is its very 'uselessness' that liberates extensive imaginative possibilities (of unlimited applicability).

The constraint of 'needing to explain' or 'rationalise' the activity was removed and an open 'what if I were to...' consciousness encouraged: richly speculative and dense with permutation. Chance was also employed directly to generate random options within which further suggestive opportunities would arise 'to play around with'.

I offered a pictographic drawing workshop as a part of the project working with an initial (complex) chance generated pattern that underwent a series of creative modifications towards a pictograph or character, progressively simplified to a set of gestured marks that alluded to the formation of a language.

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The following twelve characters derive from an ancient form of pictographic chinese script now obsolete, A pictograph can be described as a 'picture representing an idea', something that is both image and text at the same time (literally: picture-writing). This particular sequence of pictographs was found on an otherwise imageless scroll measuring some two metres in length, the 'text' forming its entire content. The immediate question arises as to what it is exactly that this scroll is depicting and in attempting to answer this question we quickly come up against our incapacity to decipher, that leads then to a state of puzzlement (of being baffled).

Treating the twelve pictographs as a set of instructions and in the light of the following quotes from Edward Debono's "The Use of Lateral Thinking" develop activities that are a speculative response to them, allowing chance as much as possible to direct the course of events, playing around with the possibilities inherent in each character in turn.

"It is difficult to do something deliberately which must not be deliberate. It is difficult to set off in a direction towards nowhere."

"The interpretation of a situation may be looked upon as an anagram. Things fit together and make sense, but this does not preclude their being put together in a new way that makes even more sense. Everyone has the right to doubt everything as often as they please. No way of looking at things is too sacred to be reconsidered. No way of doing things is beyond improvement. It should be possible to look at a wheel and reconsider its efficiency."

"With lateral thinking one wanders and wonders. Something may be noticed for the pure sake of noticing. There is no attempt to explain it at once, no attempt to give it an importance. The thing is just noticed. Later on it might prove useful. But it is noted in its pure form, unadulterated by consideration of importance or having to fit into a context. In this way the richness of an open consciousness embraces all that is offered without the need to explain or classify or construct at every instant. It is in such a context that chance works to generate new ideas."

"The very uselessness of play is its greatest asset. It is this freedom from design or commitment that allows chance to juxtapose things which would not otherwise have been arranged in this way, to construct a sequence of events which would not otherwise have been constructed."

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