

Introduction

Definition is a dialogue

While definition may seem intuitive, the task of creating an explicit definition for a complex concept such as design requires an understanding of methods to make the process constructive. This poster will describe and illustrate a method largely based upon Aristotle's essentialist genus/species model of definition.

Like Socrates and Plato before, Aristotle viewed definition as a dialectical process, a back and forth discussion of: proposing definitions; interrogating these proposals through clarifying terms used and identifying contradictions; then, based on this interrogation, proposing a new definition, which would start the process again.

Although often seemingly circular, with no clear answer in the end, this process leads to a greater personal and shared understanding of the term being defined and how other terms relate to it.

Determine sense of the word

Design as a discipline

Design is a label we attach to many things: a motif, a sketch, a plan, a discipline and more. This range of word-uses requires us to first determine which sense of the word we are defining. Here, we are defining design as a *discipline* or subject area.

For designers, defining design—whether tacit or explicit—plays a central role in rationalizing our special knowledge, skills and methods. This rationalization is useful for: self-identification; developing a framework for design education and design practice. For example, one can use definition to explain to those in other disciplines how design relates to them.

There are many types of definition (lexical, ostensive, stipulative, etc.) each with its own process of definition and method of evaluation. This poster is using *stipulative* definition, that is, what a term ought to mean. This is contrasted by the lexical definition which tries to list and describe all common usages of a term.

Define genus and species

Definition of design

requires an understanding of:

- the category (genus) which design belongs to;
- the differentia to distinguish design from other things in the same category (species)

The diagram below attempts to illustrate these points by showing design within a larger category (genus) called: *discipline* or subject-area. Design is differentiated among other disciplines by the next category, which divides the disciplines into activities: understand, plan, execute. Design exists among other disciplines (species) concerned with conceiving a plan that applies understanding to solve a human problem. Within this 'planning' category, design is finally differentiated between engineering (plans that apply knowledge from physical science) and politics (plans that apply knowledge from political science). Fine arts is a special category because it has non-practical aims.

Define related terms

Terms that are contained within the definition must be clearer than the term being defined.

For example, if one used a term like 'fine art' in their definition, this necessarily leads to a discussion about the concept of fine art. This diagram proposes a concept of art through the introduction of two more terms: form, poesis (meaning-making); both of which are described through listing examples.

Another relationship that may or may not be central to one's definition of design is economics. This social science informs much of design research but its model of viewing the world may seem narrow to some, so it has not been included. The following miniature diagram demonstrates how and where it could fit in:

- economics
- business
- service and product delivery

Define middle terms

Each named term/category is an exemplar, creating a gradient of categories that fall in-between

Since many phenomena within the scope of this diagram may fit two categories at the same time, each division exists on a continuum with grey cases existing in between. For example, the platypus is a mammal that lays eggs, creating middle category called: monotremes. Similarly, a furniture-maker who conceives/plans the form of a chair, but also executes/makes the chair sits in a middle category between design and manufacturer, called: *craft*.

For fine arts, the line between 'understanding' and 'planning' is very blurry, since an artist uses their work as a form of understanding.

In psychology, the line between material and immaterial is very blurry, as there is no clear separation between the study of physiological and cognitive phenomena.

Compare definitions

Is the design product both material and immaterial?

This diagram illustrates the possible difference between two definitions of design. The main contrast is the scope of the discipline (one much broader than the other). This difference is largely based on how one answers the following question: is the design product a *material* (physical) artifact that must be perceived (see, touch, etc.); or, is it both *material* and *immaterial*, including products such as policies, laws and services.

1. Narrow definition

Design is the planning and conceiving of material products, with equal attention to its meaning, form, function and usability.

2. Broad definition

"Design is the human power of conceiving, planning, and making products that serve human beings in the accomplishment of their individual and collective purposes." (Buchanan 9)

Poster References

Schiappa, Edward. *Defining reality: definitions and the politics of meaning*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press. 2003.
Buchanan, Richard. "Design Research and the New Learning." *Design Issues*, 2001, 17(4), 3-23. doi: Article.

1 NARROW DEFINITION

DOMAIN

Material / Physical

Immaterial / Metaphysical

Understand

Aim: Truth or understanding

Plan (Applied)

Aim: Meet needs, aspirations

Execute

Aim: Match plan

ACTIVITY

Physical Sciences

physics, chemistry, biology

Engineering

struct., materials, chem.

Health Sciences

genetics, medicine

Social Sciences

psychology, sociology, linguistics

Design

urban, industrial, graphic design, etc.

Craft

Manufacturing, Construction and Delivery

building trades, factory and assembly-line, technical trades, printing, etc.

DISCIPLINE / SUBJECT AREA

Fine Arts

music, visual art, film/theatre, poetry, etc.

Form

rhyme, meter
line, colour, medium
lighting, timing
melody, tempo
instrument

Poesis

meaning, rhetoric
image, symbol
image, dialogue
lyrics

Ethics

political science, political philosophy

Politics and Law

policies, law, services, etc.

Administration

gov't ministry, institution

Logic

symbolic logic, mathematics

Computing Sciences

information, computation

2 BROAD DEFINITION

DOMAIN

Material / Physical

Immaterial / Metaphysical

Understand

Aim: Truth or understanding

Design

Aim: Meet needs, aspirations

Execute

Aim: Match plan

ACTIVITY

Physical Sciences

physics, chemistry, biology

Engineering

struct., materials, chem.

Health Sciences

genetics, medicine

Social Sciences

psychology, sociology, linguistics

Urban, Industrial, Graphic Design, etc.

spaces, buildings, tools, fashion, visual comm., etc.

Craft

Manufacturing, Construction and Delivery

building trades, factory and assembly-line, technical trades, printing, etc.

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Fine Arts

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