

Book Proposal: *StudioLab Manifesto: Critical Design for Liberal Arts*

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StudioLab Manifesto: Critical Design for Liberal Arts outlines a pedagogy for renewing the liberal arts by combining critical thinking, social activism, and media design. Drawing on decades of academic and professional experience, our goal is to *democratize digitality*—the practices of digital culture—just as 19th-century education helped to democratize literacy. While modern literacy produced solitary skills associated with books, seminar rooms, and disciplinary institutions, digitality adds collaborative, transdisciplinary practices for screens, media studios, and network societies. Openly recombinant, StudioLab is a transversal pedagogy that moves students through seminar, studio, lab, and field experiences, enabling them to integrate conceptual, aesthetic, technical, and socially-engaged learning in ways we believe are vital for 21st-century liberal arts.

In StudioLab, students role-play as *critical design teams*, combining critical thinking, art activism, and human-centered design to tackle contemporary challenges and reimagine larger social systems. Countering the widespread devaluation of the liberal arts, we seek to democratize critical design practices that move between academy, community, and the larger world, *injecting values of cultural efficacy into social systems increasingly dominated by technical effectiveness and organizational efficiency*. At stake is a fundamental transvaluation of values led by a revitalized liberal arts. To this end, StudioLab integrates the liberal arts' critical thinking, the strategic thinking of organizations, and the creative making of new media. The democratization of digitality proceeds via the democratization of critical design, which for us entails mashing up critical theory, design thinking, and experience design in order to open up new ways of thinking and acting in the world.

Traditional disciplines and media forms pose barriers to creating transversal, collaborative networks as they speak primarily to specialists and support a highly restrained, tree-like style of thinking: Platonic ideation, the belief that we think in ideas. StudioLab moves students from disciplinary fields to transdisciplinary networks, from detached critique to engaged co-creation, from monomedium texts to multimedia forms. These shifts entail new modes of *post-ideational thought and action*, described as “collide-o-scopic” by Marshall McLuhan and theorized as “flash reason” by Gregory Ulmer. Post-ideation moves us beyond fundamental Western assumptions about thinking and doing: the image of distinct ideas, stable subjects and objects, and clear separations between theory and practice, experts and amateurs, writing and media.

StudioLab seeks to democratize a style of practice-based, rhizomatic thinking that reanimates ideas, images, sounds, and events into transmedia *thought-action figures*, figures captured by storyboards, prototypes, demos, and other diagrammatic forms that gather and trigger creativity. *Figures transmediate ideas, remixing them from virtual to actual*. Ideas perform a specific function: as constative, representational forms, they report truth in static, “knowledge of” units, yet often hide the underlying means of production and desire. Thought-action figures, by contrast, function as existential performatives, as highly charged triggers of heuristic “know how”: *A ha! That's it!* Such figures stage ideas as flashes that one must engage to receive and send on: *one understands ideas, one undergoes figures*. Moving between different experiential realms, students co-create the creative patterns and intuitive sparks that compose their own thought-action figures. Figures emerge within projects, gather in archives and portfolios, and inspire future work.

At the heart of StudioLab are innovative assignments and design frames that integrate conceptual, aesthetic, technical, and social learning through individual exercises and larger collaborative projects. In our “Make a Toy” exercise, students design tiny desiring-machines—toys crafted to generate joy in others—while learning principles of experience design. To become thought-action figures, concepts are spatialized, taken them back to the drawing board and connected with others, and explored through hands-on engagement. StudioLab’s project-based pedagogy unfolds by juxtaposing studio exercises alongside seminar discussion, lab training, and time for fieldwork, presentation, and reflection. In our “Design an Activist Museum” project, students self-organize and scale up their desiring-machines into critical design teams by researching activist groups such as ACT-UP, the Guerrilla Girls, the Yes Men, and Molle Industria. Miming their different mixes of social activism and tactical media, teams role-play as intimate bureaucracies (Saper) to draw on local public commons and transfer their research to issues and situations that resonate with their own lives. Like all our projects, “Design a Museum” is modular and portable: it can embrace potentially any topic, field, or community.

StudioLab’s transversal projects move people in three ways and provide critical design frames all along the way. On a first, spatial level, students in a course, workshop, or even a single, 2-hour class might begin with a hands-on studio installation, shift to seminar for critical discussion and lab for software training, and then conclude with open workshop or field work. *Bodies move and learn differently in each space.* To help students mark these differences, we introduce the design frame CAT (Conceptual-Aesthetic-Technical), which maps on to seminar, studio, and lab activities. Students use CAT to both analyze and create. Our early iterations of StudioLab at NYU during the 1990s’ web boom shuttled students between a performance studio on Broadway and a computer lab on West 4th Street, while decades later at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, laptops and mobile furniture enabled students to generate ideas, conduct research, design media, and present their work all within a single space. At a larger scale, our “lecturelab” format can reach hundreds of students across a wide range of skill levels. In all cases, at this first level, bodies are reshaped by moving through distinct learning environments: seminar, studio, lab, field.

At a second, existential level, StudioLab’s next design frame, UX or user experience, draws on fields of rhetoric, design, and performance to teach students ways of transforming people internally by moving them spiritually, conceptually, imaginatively, emotionally, sensually, and/or viscerally—experiences that may unfold in schools, museums, churches, community centers, theme parks, or online. UX focuses on *experience design* or the crafting of human interactions, *information architecture* or the spatiotemporal structure of these experiences, and the *information design* or look-and-feel at any moment of their unfolding. Using the UX frame both analytically and synthetically, *students design transformational experiences for multiple stakeholders: community collaborators, target audiences, the general public, and themselves.* They learn how early ACT-UP members transformed their own anger and fear into love and action using social activism and tactical media, creating direct actions designed in turn to transform the feelings, thoughts, and actions of their target audiences and the wider general public. In our “Transform a Paper into an App, Service, or Social Movement” project, students scale up their intimate bureaucracies toward collective assemblages of enunciation where transformations of larger social systems become possible. At this second level, students use the UX frame to engage internal, “experiential architectures” of different stakeholders.

At a third, sociotechnical level, StudioLab's transversal pedagogy moves students across different social fields as they connect and engage people across disciplines, institutions, and communities. Seeking to valorize cultural efficacy in systems ruled by organizational efficiency and technical effectiveness, we draw on design thinking (DT), a method of human-centered, strategic thinking used to tackle intractable, "wicked problems" found in organizations and societies. Developed by the design firm IDEO and Stanford's d.school, DT meshes with StudioLab's mission of democratizing the networked practices of digitality, for it helps students learn ways to engage values of economic sustainability (efficiency) and technical feasibility (effectiveness) with those of human desirability (efficacy). As important: DT's model of ideation is post-Platonic: it relies on multiple local knowledges or *doxa* rather than a single, expert knowledge or *episteme*. In our "Design Future Learning" project, students reimagine a specific major, student service, or educational institution. Here ideas function as the means rather than the ends, entering an open, iterative process where collaborative problem-solving and innovation unfold via shared media and the posing of counter-factual possibilities and alternative worlds. Ideas become collective thought-action figures by moving from virtual to actual across different spaces as teams apply DT's transdisciplinary process of empathy, re/definition, ideation, prototyping, and testing.

An essential element of StudioLab's critical design approach is digital media itself, especially the production of *smart media*, emerging scholarly genres such as video essays, theory comics, and multimedia presentations which supplement traditional media forms of books and articles. Thought-action figures take shape via the circulation and sharing of smart media, whose genres mashup instruction and entertainment, *logos* and *mythos*, *eidos* and *imagos*, *episteme* and *doxa*. Everyday media forms such as public presentations, posters, and YouTube videos carry powerful communicative force, while search engines, wikis, and other tools have transformed knowledge discovery and empowered communities to connect locally and globally. At their very best, even the most derided of media forms—e.g., PowerPoint—can produce intelligent, sensitive effects for audiences intimate and massive: one thinks of Al Gore's 2006 *An Inconvenient Truth*, effectively an Oscar-winning PowerPoint, or Chai Jing's 2015 *Under the Dome*, a powerful, censored documentary downloaded by hundreds of millions of viewers. StudioLab's critical design approach uses smart media to forge transversal connections across spaces, disciplines, and communities. Yet while TED talks, digital storytelling, and similar media forms have become ubiquitous, what's lacking is a *language* for analyzing them and a *practice* for creating them in scaleable, sustainable ways.

As its name suggests, StudioLab combines creativity and analysis, thinking and making. Our collaborative projects, design frames, and smart media genres provide students and instructors a transdisciplinary language and practice for reimagining the liberal arts. StudioLab mixes studio, lab, seminar, and field activities in innovative ways applicable across a wide array of contexts and scales. The collaborative practices of digitality we describe are emergent in our remixed culture, and because we draw on an array of existing processes and forms, StudioLab is itself inherently mashable. We are not inventing digitality as democratizing its practices and forms, describing their affordances and constraints, and encouraging others to channel and remix them. Based on our experience teaching and working at a variety of universities and media firms, we believe StudioLab can plug-and-play in any contemporary institution. We invite you to take our ideas and reconfigure them in sites where you live and teach.