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#Decolonise!

Design educators reflecting on the call for the decolonisation of education

Reimagining Design Education Through Empathy

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Abstract

This paper will explore my intervention into decolonising design education as a response to bell hooks' call for a teaching philosophy that recognises empathy and respect as devices for freedom and sustainable world making. By reflecting on my experience as a recent Masters degree graduate, a newly appointed first-year design lecturer and as a design mentor on a youth training programme I will provide evidence that, in the right learning environment, such a pedagogical approach is possible.

My Masters thesis asserted that Design for Sustainability (DfS) was a critical input for preparing students for more ethical practice once they graduate, as well as to inspire and empower them to lead the way as change agents in industry. While the onus was placed on design educators to prepare the next generation of design leaders with the requisite knowledge, skills and tools to make a meaningful impact not only on their profession, but also on the world at large, the findings highlighted the critical need for students to be able to confidently define their role as designers in the world. Students come from diverse backgrounds having experienced varying levels of exposure to, and awareness of the design world. Some students face socio-economic challenges that impact on their ability to meet the basic requirements of the course – attending lectures and submitting work. For these reasons, I have come to realise that students first need to be primed to engage with design as a problem-solving tool, on a personal level, before they will recognise their potential role as change agents and appreciate the necessity of practicing DfS. In this paper I will discuss the importance of creating awareness among students about how their principles, opinions and desires can affect their design decisions and therefore influence what impact they make on the world around them. Possible ways of achieving this include: tapping into and respecting the students' situated knowledge; connecting with the students' personal values; encouraging empathy; and shifting the relationship between lecturer and student to be one based more on mentorship. Moreover, these approaches are seen as hopeful and possible attempts to overcome some of the inherited inequalities and disadvantages of design education in South Africa by foregrounding students' personal experiences.

Keywords:

bell hooks; Design for Sustainability; empathy; personal values; situated knowledge

Introduction

To educate as the practice of freedom is a way of teaching that anyone can learn. That learning process comes easiest to those of us who teach who also believe that there is an aspect of our vocation that is sacred; who believe that our work is not merely to share information but to share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of our students. To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin (hooks 1994, p. 13).

As an educator-practitioner who has lectured, mentored and worked alongside young designers over the last decade I have first-hand experience of how different pedagogical methods can either nurture, or hinder, a student's personal growth, therefore directly impacting their approach and ability as designers. Driven by the realisation that a new breed of conscious designers was urgently needed to advance my industry – the communication design industry – towards a more sustainable path, I enrolled in a Masters degree programme that allowed me to investigate how this could be achieved. My research, completed last year, focused on the importance of integrating *Design for Sustainability* (DfS) into communication design curricula as a means to inspire and empower students to lead the way as change agents in industry. Rather than unpacking the outcome of my thesis – a set of adaptable guidelines proffered as a way of making DfS more accessible to students – this paper will discuss the findings that are considered most relevant to the theme of this conference, *Decolonising Design Education*, and doing so in the light and spirit of bell hooks' statement cited above. The findings I discuss include: tapping into and respecting the students' situated knowledge; connecting with the students' personal values; and encouraging empathy. These approaches are seen as hopeful and possible attempts to overcome some of the inherited inequalities and disadvantages of design education in South Africa by foregrounding students' personal experiences. This paper will explore my intervention into decolonising design education as a response to hooks' call for a teaching philosophy that recognises empathy and respect as devices for freedom and sustainable world making. By reflecting on my experience as a design mentor on a youth training programme I will provide evidence that, in the right learning environment, such an approach is possible.

DfS in communication design education

DfS is described by Thorpe (2007, p. 13) as the theories and practices for design that cultivate conditions that will support human well-being indefinitely. Put differently, DfS is a response to the momentous challenge faced by society to contribute positively towards environmental stewardship, social responsibility, cultural preservation, and economic viability (Spangenberg, Fuad-Luke & Blincoe 2010; Perullos 2013; Robertson 2014). Communication designers have a critical role to play in the drive towards sustainability by adapting to the needs and daunting challenges of a rapidly changing world. Through advertising, marketing, packaging and websites, the communication design industry, one way or the other, influences people's daily lives (Price & Yates 2015). Designers can have a positive impact through the materials and production processes they choose, and more significantly, through the persuasive messages they communicate designers have the power to inform public thoughts, opinions and views, and can therefore influence change in attitudes and behaviours (Dougherty 2008; Sherin 2008; Shea 2012). With this power comes responsibility – designers must become accountable for the impact of their design decisions – and my thesis asserted that DfS is a critical input for preparing students for more ethical practice once they graduate.

While the onus was placed on design educators to prepare the next generation of design leaders with the requisite knowledge, skills and tools to make a meaningful impact not only on their profession, but also on the world at large, the findings also highlighted the need for students to be able to confidently define their role as designers in the world. Moreover, in order for students to personally take on the required responsibility of their profession, they first need to understand the positive role design can play in their own surroundings.

Linking sustainability to students' situated knowledge: context, culture and values

As was discovered in my research findings, and more recently in my engagement with first year design students, the students' backgrounds and schooling influence how they connect with concepts such as DfS. As stated by one of the design lecturers interviewed in my thesis: "If students cannot personally connect with what sustainability means and why it is important, it will be meaningless to them" (Lecturer 1, 2013). Because students come from diverse backgrounds, with some students facing socio-economic challenges that impact on their ability to meet the basic requirements of the course – attending lectures and submitting work – I realised that students first need to be primed to engage with design as a problem solving tool, on a personal level, before they will recognise their potential role as change agents and appreciate the necessity of practicing DfS. How can this be done? By tapping into the students' situated knowledge of how design is relevant to their own lives.

Haraway (1988, p. 590) proposes that knowledge is situated in time and place, thus providing context for peoples view points. What my experience within academia has uncovered however is that due to certain barriers – large class sizes, varying literacy levels, limited one-on-one contact with students and limited time for dialogue – educators are not afforded the opportunity to better understand and promote students' lived experiences as a source of valuable knowledge and inspiration. Rather most students' regulate their design decisions based on predetermined expectations of what is good design and often this is defined by First World design traditions and aesthetics. As observed by Lecturer 1 (2013), students approach problems "in a Western way that is disconnected to their daily lives and does not consider their reality". In terms of DfS education this is perpetuated as the majority of available resources and examples of DfS originate from a western point of view. These are mostly generic and are not particularly relevant to the South African design context. While many authors have motivated for "global best practices" to facilitate the advancement of sustainable communication design, Giard and Walker (2013, p. 1) have an opposing view of such a homogenous approach; they suggest: "proposing universally applicable solutions is antithetical to a comprehensive understanding of design for sustainability". They believe that in order to be meaningful and effective, DfS has to be "attuned to place and context" (Giard & Walker 2013, p. 1). In order to really engage with DfS and recognise its importance, students need to develop a personal connection with the concept. Thus, extending Giard and Walker's (2013) concept, for design education to be accessible to students not only must curricula be attuned to the local context in which it is taught, but it should also be framed within the context of the challenges faced by the students and their communities.

As Haraway's (1998) concept of "situated" suggests, knowledge is not context-free, and neither is it value-free – knowledge is situated in or informed and shaped by historical and socio-political values, belief systems and cultural differences. Contrary to what hooks spoke of in the opening quote of this paper – education as a practice of freedom – from my experience of working with students right at the start of their tertiary academic careers, I have come to realise that for the majority of students their secondary education has not primed them to appreciate their lived experience, and tap into their culture and values as

guiding inspiration for their design decisions. The *Collins Dictionary* (2004, p. 934) defines values as “a person's principles or standards of behavior” [sic], and according to Sherin (2013, p. 6) communication designers who choose to practice sustainably are “driven by values-based decision making”. This idea is supported by Benson and Napier (2012, p. 213) who believe that the best solution to promote the uptake of DfS in communication design education is in “connecting issues of sustainability to the values of design students”. While sustainability itself can be understood as a value system that guides people towards more conscious behaviour within society, we cannot assume that all students will have a similar set of values, or that their values are necessarily aligned with sustainability principles. Students do not have to ascribe to the same values as the educators; they must however be able to articulate what it is they believe in, and what they want to work towards as designers. Through educational experiments, Benson and Napier (2012) realised that most students are in fact unaware of how their personal values, opinions and goals impact their design decisions. As expressed by Sachs (1988, p. 189), a stalwart supporter of South Africa's democratic constitution: “[c]ulture is us, it is who we are, how we see ourselves and the vision we have of the world”. It is therefore important for educators to encourage students to determine their personal values, with respect to their diverse cultural backgrounds, and then to interrogate how these values connect to the larger environmental, social, cultural and economic context in which their design decisions are made (Fleming, 2013; Wals, 2014). According to hooks (1998, p. 40): “[w]hen we, as educators, allow our pedagogy to be radically changed by our recognition of a multicultural world, we can give students the education they desire and deserve”. Furthermore, if it is considered that a teacher's personal values and views about sustainability can influence the way in which the subject is taught, it becomes even more important for students to be able to critically evaluate information and engage with it on a personal level (Cotton & Djordjevic 2011; Jones, Selby & Sterling 2010). This also highlights the need for students to learn that while they do not have to agree with what other people say, they have to respect their right to say it, which in actual fact is what constitutes freedom of expression¹ as one of the cornerstones of South African democracy. Educators therefore need to guide this process by engaging the students in “reflective discussions” about their understanding and interpretation of what they have been taught and its relevance to their own lives and design practice (Cadle 2011, p. 8; Benson & Napier 2012, p. 200). This speaks to design pedagogy needing to be student-orientated and human-centered, and the key to this is empathy in hooks' (1994) sense.

While in my thesis I viewed *Design Thinking* as a strategic tool for tackling the complexities of designing sustainably, and therefore suggested that it should be taught in design curricula, central to my approach to empathy as a pedagogic principle is the idea that not only is Design Thinking valuable for students to consider, it is also an important tool for educators who are wanting to drive action-for-change in the learning environment. Of particular relevance to this paper is the view that Design Thinking is a collaborative, human-centered approach to problem solving that is premised on empathy, where empathy “is the capacity to step into other people's shoes, to understand their lives, and start to solve problems from their perspectives” (IDEO.ORG 2016, p. 7). Practicing empathy ensures that solutions do not only consider the end users' practical needs, but also their cultural and emotional needs (Pourdehnad, Wexler & Wilson 2011; IDEO 2015). According to the *Design Thinking for Educators Toolkit*, educators should use Design Thinking's empathetic approach to reimagine the learning experience through the lens of the students' needs and desires (IDEO 2012, p.

¹ Though, obviously, this concept of respect for the freedom of expression as a creative pedagogical principle excludes, like the South African Constitution itself, hate speech.

2). This links back to the value of integrating DfS into curricula, because what is DfS if it is not about reimagining what is possible.

While educators should aspire to educate as a means to empower students and to promote freedom, the realities of the limitations under which they work may obstruct this ideal, as was my experience when working with first year design students, which is described below.

Turning vision into reality

My thesis argued for a proactive approach to preparing communication design students to become agents of change by incorporating DfS as early as possible within curricula, so when at the beginning of the 2017 academic year I was tasked with developing and implementing a first year module on the fundamental elements and principles of design I saw it as the perfect opportunity to practically apply my research findings. I believed that my role as an educator was to stimulate the students to design for sustainability, to design with empathy and respect for the relational implications of their design choices. However, over the course of the first semester I realised that due to many complex issues, including those previously mentioned – differing secondary education experiences and standards; varying levels of exposure to and awareness of the design world; lack of confidence; language barriers; poor time-management skills; economic challenges; and crowded classrooms – the vast majority of students were not ready or able to engage in topics relevant to DfS. Rather than being motivated to shape their situated knowledge, the students took on the role of passive receivers of information. This meant that instead of being active participants in the learning space they were consumers and I experienced this as an impediment to the freedom of education. The structural limitations of the institution meant that I could not easily put into practice the concept of empathy within education. Moreover, this exposed the tensions that exist between the ideal of teaching to promote freedom and the urgent realities of the legacy of an unequal education system that educators and students have inherited.

Next, I will discuss a possible way to overcome this by sharing my experience of a learning space where young people were guided along a journey of defining their role in the world while being exposed to the relationship between values and actions.

Offsetting existing pedagogical limitations: learning's from a youth training programme

In my professional capacity I worked as a design mentor at Livity Africa, a non-profit youth development organisation. The purpose of the organisation was described as follows:

We exist to work with young people and for young people; to harness and accelerate their ability to create their own sustainable livelihoods (Livity Africa, sa).

An example of how this was achieved was through *Live SA*, a nationwide youth-run media channel. *Live SA* provided a platform for eighteen to twenty-five year olds – predominantly black South Africans – to receive on-the-job training from professional mentors representing various disciplines including design, photography, videography, digital marketing and journalism. Every three months there was an intake of up to twenty-five young people who would be responsible for generating relevant content in an authentic and creative way so as to inspire and engage the youth. While to some extent I collaborated with all of the trainees, my focus was on the design and photography trainees of which there was an average of six per intake. My role as design mentor was not only to up-skill the trainees, but to better equip them for the changing working world by guiding them on a journey of self-discovery and self-actualization. Rather than dictating what content they created, or how it should be visually communicated, my responsibility was to assist them in finding their own voice and personal means of expression. The key to achieving this was by encouraging the trainees to

foreground their lived experiences, as well as challenging them to question how they – the South Africa youth – could live better lives.

Right from the start, the trainees' learning experience was shaped by a sense of equality that was realised through active participation and co-creation. This required that everyone who participated in the training programme needed to be empathetic towards one another's lived experience. As mentors we made the time to accommodate the trainees' situated knowledge into our knowledge and perceptions, allowing us to reflect on the context of where they were coming from, where they wanted to go and what was important for them to be able to succeed in life. We were inspired by each person's individual story and tried to tap into their passions as much as possible, in that way making them feel valued and respected. Through this empathetic engagement with the trainees we were embracing their otherness. The following quote by Léopold Senghor captures this experience of mutuality succinctly:

I feel the other, I dance the other, Therefore I am (Senghor in Fourie sa, 2007, p. 210).

Because the trainees were defining all of the content themselves, they were not only enacting their creativity, they were identifying with their own value system. Moreover, this was happening in a shared space, making possible the discovery of shared values. The content created for *Live SA* covered a range of topics from music, art, fashion, relationships, career advice, events, politics, and news – including on the ground reporting of the *Fees Must Fall* uprising. In varying degrees, the content addressed issues that were connected to the four pillars of sustainability: environmental, social, cultural and economic (Werbach 2009, pp. 9-10). Adding to this, the trainees' involvement in producing content for a community that they empathised with allowed them to better understand what role they could play in society, and what impact they could make on the world around them. A good example of this was the content and collateral created for the *Voting Is Power* (VIP) campaign. The aim of the VIP campaign was to “encourage young people to vote and become active agents in their democracy” (Live Mag sa, sp). By motivating the youth to amplify their voices around political issues and to take to the polls, the trainees – in a very pragmatic way – were co-creators of their own path to freedom.

With each cohort, we witnessed the trainees' personal growth. As attested by Breytenbach (2017), *Livity Africa's Head of Impact and Training*, “[t]he young peoples' confidence levels increased greatly, which enabled them to confidently contribute to conversations and openly share their opinions. Also, their hard and soft skills improved which helped in preparing them for a constantly changing world of work”. By the end of the programme the trainees were better prepared to deal with the demands of the working world and better equipped to succeed in whatever path they chose. In terms of the design trainees, not only did their conceptual and technical skills improve, but their approach to design also shifted from being mostly about aesthetics to a powerful communication tool for raising awareness of the youth agenda.

Live SA epitomised the learning environment that hooks (2003, p. xv) envisaged the classroom to be: “A place that is life-sustaining and mind-expanding, a place of liberating mutuality where teacher and student together work in partnership.” There was a marked difference between the connection I developed with the young design trainees and the first year university students. My experience indicates that, while there will always be room for the expert's voice, the foundational relationship between lecturer and student needs to shift to one more of mentorship and guidance. At *Live SA* any potential barriers to the practice of freedom were broken down through a degree of mutuality in the formation of empathy and respect – the same needs to happen in education.

As Wingfield (2017) suggests, the imperative to decolonise education cannot simply be a political obligation to make curriculum content more Afrocentric. Rather it must be driven by ethical necessity. The empathetic approaches to teaching discussed throughout this paper – tapping into and respecting the students’ situated knowledge, connecting with the students’ personal values, and redefining the lecturers role to one more of mentorship – relate to decolonising design education in that they play a key role in breaking down barriers and building meaningful relationships between educators and students. Establishing deeper connections between educators and students will allow them to work together to tap into and celebrate the students’ own culture, traditions and knowledge, rather than imposing someone else’s rules.

Through her writing hooks (2003) gives voice to these practices; and she advocates for a foundational and ethical restructuring of the way in which students are taught. A decolonised teaching philosophy should be about facilitating and validating the voices and situated experiences of others. This is especially relevant when considering a human-centered approach because it is reliant on the identifiable needs of others.

Darder (2015) highlights, in her reflective book *Freire and Education*, that a decolonised education is about empowerment. If educators have a better understanding of their students’ realities they can adapt how they teach so that design education becomes a more accessible and democratic learning experience.

Conclusion

While certain structural limitations exist within the education system, and often educators are not able to contribute towards the decision-making within that system – such as the number of students enrolled in a course, or the core structure of curricula – they do have the capability to reimagine the system. Following the human-centered approach of Design Thinking, educators can contribute towards the redesign of the education system by adapting the form and delivery of the course content in such a way that it becomes a more nurturing learning experience that is accessible and inspirational to the students whilst respecting their inherent diversity. The first step to achieving this would be to create a learning environment that students recognise as being an equal and safe space. Based on my experience, there are several empathetic approaches that educators can implement, these include:

- Learning students’ names, and referring to them by name, right from the start of the academic year;
- understanding and acknowledging the students’ cultural and academic backgrounds;
- being increasingly mindful of the various barriers that students face;
- promoting access, in a positive light, to institutional support structures such as financial aid, food aid and health care;
- enabling students to discover their voices and personal means of expression;
- encouraging open and respectful dialogue between students so that they become aware of each others realities;
- introducing design concepts in such a way that they are contextually relevant to the students’ own lives;
- setting design briefs that provide the opportunity for students to explore how design can positively impact their communities;
- eliminating the need for expensive materials to execute a practical brief;

- being lenient with deadlines, specifically for students who face socio-economic and/or psychological challenges; and
- building confidence amongst students by identifying and promoting their interests and skills.

This paper therefore argues that in order to implement a sustainable, inclusive, democratic and decolonised approach to education – as a practice of freedom – it becomes about a philosophy of teaching that is founded on deep empathy and respect for students’ needs, aspirations and motivations.

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