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**On being a design student today: COVID's push-pull with instrumentalism and maturity**

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In this short paper I discuss recent responses to COVID in the Communication Design department of RMIT University School of Design. I touch on three examples in which the limitations and challenges of 'COVID pedagogy' have led to – what I believe are – demonstrations for positive futures in design and design education: a 'Global Design Studio' in which three design education institutions come together synchronously to push the boundaries of collaborative education, a virtual study tour between Singapore and Melbourne through which cultural exchange is interrogated and amplified, and a student-led panel discussion asking the difficult questions of and through design.

The global pandemic crisis has changed everything. In doing so it has revealed the landscape in stark relief like an earthquake turning the soil, or a bushfire burning dry sclerophyll: destroying, collapsing, revealing, yet – as I suggest in this paper – clearing fertile ground for the new and, with this, bringing possibilities of renewal and innovation.

We are still coming to terms with this pandemic. We know things will never be the same; we are never 'going back' to how things were, instead we're moving forward into how things will be. For design education the pandemic has, of course, been challenging, though not quite as challenging as for a number of disciplines in which the phenomenology of material practice and its interpersonal sharing in studio is absolutely indispensable to learning. For Communication Design we can – and do – get by with online learning. Our students, with their MacBooks, can sit in their bedrooms, kitchens or cafés – wherever they are in the world – and produce design work. It can sometimes appear hard to see why remote learning for design is any different to those same students working on those same MacBooks on campus in a university's teaching studio. So, as design educators, we carry on; our students have generally stayed with us and have kept producing work. The desire to return to

campus, to return to real cohort community and a rich personal tertiary education experience is very strong, though sometimes countered by the risk of exposure, forced isolation and sickness. For much of 2020 and 2021 Melbourne, and the Victorian government, has famously locked down any face-to-face on-campus interaction. The events I discuss in this paper have been born out of these challenging circumstances.

The future of tertiary education remains uncertain and challenged. International students – upon whom a lot of this system relies – continue to find it challenging to travel and student numbers are dropping. International students have been locked out of Australia so the danger is that they will look elsewhere (Lehmann 2021). International students who in the past would have travelled to Australia for their education now may not want to gamble on the chance that they might be enrolling in a hastily developed online (or concurrent) offering that does not allow them to leave their family home for an offshore experience, does not help them improve their English and does not allow them to feel part of, and supported by, something bigger than themselves – a cohort of student designers.

### **Design Education at a crossroads: reductive / productive**

I believe that Design Education is at a crossroads. On the one hand we are seeing a reductive, instrumentalist future for education with an emphasis on 'priorities' and 'essentials' and a privileging of quantitative instrumentalist outcomes: skills, clarity, competitive advantage (Coleborne & Newport-Peace 2021). On the other hand, the crisis has produced innovation and creativity, forced questioning of roles and, through its 'all in it together' zeitgeist, has created opportunities for a productive maturing of the fundamentals of education and practice.

Through the former reductive response we can find ourselves drawn into a highly instrumentalist view of the purpose of education (to get a job), the purpose of practice (to do jobs), and our role as design educators (to get them all jobs) (Norton 2020). In these conditions design educators continue to do their best and are in danger of – if not already deeply impacted by – exhaustion and a growing sense of losing touch with what brought them to teaching: the lively, dynamic and creative interplay and collaboration with those new to the worlds of design.

Yet, at the same time, we see students and lecturers displaced productively – through the very impacts of this crisis – from their traditional and habituated roles.

We see a flattening of hierarchy, a shift in what it means to *be* a student (or teacher) of design and, through this, new potentials for valuing the non-instrumentalist capacities of education and practice. With these aspects in mind, we can see that the collective global existential crisis might allow us to be reborn with newly clarified concepts for why we are here. We might have been given the opportunity, through this pandemic, to mature our understanding of what it means to be a design educator, to be a design student, and to practice design.

As the current Associate Dean of the Communication Design discipline at RMIT University, I see us as having been provided with an opportunity to move towards a mature concept for practice and, with this, a revitalisation of the priorities and concerns for design education, in particular through the ‘flattened’ hierarchy – what I have termed a ‘flat pedagogy’ – through which these positive, productive changes become manifest. By ‘flat pedagogy’ I mean our students ‘leaning in’ and taking an active role in designing their own education, in organising special events, in bringing in guest speakers, in helping their peers and in collaborating with their teachers to increase the authenticity and depth of their educational experiences. In tandem to this those students’ teachers release some control and embrace a dialogic rather than monologic role in their teaching work (English 2016) and invite their students to step up to meet them in this very active educational space.

As bell hooks states in her writing about educating for critical thinking, ‘most students resist the critical thinking process; they are more comfortable with learning that allows them to remain passive’ (hooks 2010, p. 10). Yet in the current crisis, and the current challenged conditions of teaching, remaining passive is becoming closer to not being there at all. I believe students also have become aware of this and the pointlessness that comes from a disengaged enrolment. Not all, but some, have become active, engaged, questioning and critical and we are in a position to support and amplify this shift in the dynamic of our educational community.

### **Three examples of productive displacement**

I’ll talk about three moments as examples of this productive displacement: firstly, the *Global Design Studio* which we have collaboratively run for some time at RMIT Communication Design; secondly, a virtual ‘study tour’ we offer with our Singapore students, the *Naarm/Melbourne-Kulin Study Tour*, and, thirdly, a face-to-face student-driven lecture/panel discussion run during a break in lockdown in early 2021, *Designing with(in) the Mess*.

### ***Global Design Studio: Ideas for Humanity: A Cookbook for Planetary Health***

Blair Wilde, Eva Verhoeven, Gareth Foote, Joel Karamath, Albert Fuster

Firstly, the *Global Design Studio*. This is a collaborative studio we have jointly run with University of the Arts London for some years, established following a three-year funded European *Encounter* project titled *Interact* with University of the Arts London, the Danish School of Media and Journalism, Queensland University of Technology and RMIT School of Design. Notably the *Global Design Studio* followed on the heels of *Interact*, which incorporated staff and student travel and exchanges, whereas the *Global Design Studio* was designed to continue this productive exchange virtually. In this it was a pre-COVID online studio and by the time we entered lockdown and emergency remote teaching the studio was already very familiar with the possibilities and challenges of online global design education.

In March 2021 the studio ran again as 'Ideas for Humanity: A Cookbook for Planetary Health' (WILDE 2021) and brought 20 RMIT students together with 40 students in the UK and 30 from Elisava in Barcelona. The students formed into groups and, over a two week highly intensive design 'sprint', produced design responses to global issues. These 'recipes' included upcycling clothing, personal pollution detectors and concrete recycling strategies. Later in the year we exhibited the *Global Design Studio* as part of Barcelona Design Week (RMIT University 2021) and launched this with a live panel discussion led by our partner lecturer from Elisava, Albert Fuster, as well as myself, Blair Wilde and Eva Verhoeven and Gareth Foote from UAL. The panel also included Chelsea Conner, one of our Australian students and a current second year. When asked, 'What was the best part of the studio?' Chelsea answered, 'Working with people globally, short time frames, and learning the professional practice of online collaborative design work' (RMIT University 2021). This was exciting to hear; in her own words she was demonstrating the attitudes to design and her practice that we, as teachers, would normally be saying to students about our aspirations for studio. Instead, she took the role of telling us who she is, where she is going and what she is going to do with her capacities. For me this is an instance of advanced communication design pedagogy.

### ***Naarm/Melbourne-Kulin Study Tour***

Online Semur Chicken Class with Nornie Bero

Rebecca Nally, Regine Abos and others

The second example is a virtual study tour, one that Rebecca Nally has written on in detail for this ACUADS conference. The *Naarm/Melbourne-Kulin Study Tour* usually sees 50 students from our Singapore-based program travel to Melbourne in person for two weeks, explore the city and work on indigenous knowledge and cultural exchange through design. Due to COVID-19 the study tour has been forced to go virtual for the last two years. While this seems to deny the main aspect of the project – a full cohort of students travelling overseas – it has in many ways provided an opportunity for the study tour to amplify its concepts and direction and increase its pedagogical strength. It has gone from strength to strength.

In 2019, in response to the question ‘How do we create a viable virtual study tour?’ the lecturers incorporated preparation for the study tour into Rebecca Nally’s local teaching studio titled ‘Hospitable’. The students in this studio (local and international students but enrolled here in Melbourne, not Singapore) study the nature of hospitality and prepare design projects based around in most cases the hospitality industry of Melbourne. In this case the students prepared materials designed to welcome the Singapore students to Melbourne and give them an experience of different aspects of Melbourne life and culture, importantly introducing them to the Kulin nation and Melbourne/Naarm as a contemporary global city situated on unceded First Nations land. When the Singaporean students started their study tour they were welcomed with videos, publications and interactives that activated this sense of place and difference. The ‘local’ students reached out; the Singapore students were hosted. A reciprocity became established between the two cohorts that had, in the past, been very difficult to establish during the face-to-face study tour. Local students were set a ‘real world’ problem, one that required them to extend themselves beyond their own condition to a state of welcoming and supporting the other. For me this is an instance of advanced communication design pedagogy.

### ***World We Want panel discussion: Designing with(in) the Mess***

Fayen d’Evie, Nina Gibbes, Dennis Grauel, Jane Connory and Issa el Assaad

The third example I will offer is a student-driven lecture run by students from the Master of Communication Design, principally driven by Nina Gibbes and developing from her Masters research project (Gibbes 2021). This lecture, *Designing with(in) the Mess* (The Capitol 2021), was part of Melbourne Design Week 2021 but came about also through a design studio led by lecturer Fayen D’evie which brought issues of

decolonisation, diversity and inclusivity to design practice and education. The students produced a number of outcomes: a range of posters, interviews with women designers, and discussion of what a decolonised design practice might look like. Following on from the studio and with the support of Fayen, the students took the lead in planning the lecture, inviting speakers and speaking themselves, curating and MCing the event. As Ruben Pater states in his recent book on the inherent politics in design, 'assumptions of objectivity and universality in design are closely tied to the modernist design principles as they are taught in Western design education. This book is about debunking these assumptions' (Pater 2020, p. 3). The student-led public lecture *Designing with(in) the Mess* took advantage of a short break in lockdowns to stage a cutting-edge critique of contemporary design and design education, adding its own 'debunking' capacity to accelerate these welcome shifts in our concepts for the future of design and design education. For me this is an instance of advanced communication design pedagogy.

## **Conclusion**

All three of these very briefly outlined examples display the capacity that Biggs, building on Bloom's taxonomy, situates as the highest level of educational experience, *extended abstract*: 'the essence of the extended abstract response is that it goes *beyond that which is given* whereas the relational stays with it' (Biggs & Tang 2007, p. 78). These kinds of student responses have the potential to problematise fixed knowledge. They start to demonstrate an understanding that, as future practitioners of design, they are taking part in education in to order to move into the world as producers of knowledge – along with all the complications that this role comes with.

Ellen Lupton and her sister speak about the changing nature of communication design, moving away from modernist universal generic principles towards 'a visual language enmeshed in a technologically evolving communications environment stretched and tested by an unprecedented range of people. Individuals can engage this language on their own terms, infusing it with their own energy and sensibilities in order to create communications that are appropriate to particular publics and purposes' (Lupton & Lupton 2007, p. 136). Brad Haylock, in a recent book on graphic design education, speaks of the complexity and criticality needed in future design education and 'the need for a sensitivity to polysystemic complexity and ecological equilibria. We must not shy away from the potential of graphic design as a critical practice.' (Haylock 2020, p. 257). I see these necessary changes, called for by Lupton

and Haylock above, in the three examples I have given. They are moments of communication design education that have been provoked, even forced, by the crisis of COVID. These three events have taken place in the last two years, during the challenges of COVID, yet they evidence impressive possible futures for design education: impromptu interdisciplinary online studios, global collaborations, peer student-staff communities as well as the collapse of traditions and the recognition (and deconstruction) of established disciplinary 'canons' as myopic and anachronistic.

There are other, less positive, things happening of course. COVID has had very real impacts; students and staff are, in general, exhausted. They have 'pivoted' so much they are dizzy with sudden turnarounds and remain with a strong sense that they have been given no real support to deal with all these rapid shifts and the concomitant increasing asks on their dedication and practice. Times continue to be challenging in the higher education sector; there's no money for any extras, which generally means a reduction to 'core business', away from 'real world', away from challenge, away from curated bespoke experiences, and consequently away from the rich interaction which brings so many of us to education. At times the institutional response seems to privilege a narrow view of education: students' bums on (virtual) seats, stringent policing of staff-to-student ratios, and an attempt to reduce the complexity of tertiary education to bite-size morsels able to be consumed on your smart phone like vox-pops or Instagram moments.

The three very positive examples I have presented above problematise our established roles in education. They demonstrate the benefit of flatter structures, with lecturers and students producing new knowledge together. They have the potential to deconstruct traditional edifices, allowing students to take their new knowledge and create their own industry rather than being expected to groom themselves for established roles and practices. Along with shifting the role of the design lecturer, these changes shift the institution itself so that communication design education is a shared experience, a constantly evolving co-designed space that students and staff join in order to help develop further and expand into new horizons.

As Arturo Escobar states recently in *Designing for the Pluriverse* we are 'at a moment when many design schools are feeling the pressure to adapt to the mounting ecological and social challenges of today's world' (Escobar 2017, p. 153). He argues there is a need for fundamental shifts in structure, 'my overriding concern is with

difference, and how difference is effaced or normalized – and, conversely, how it can be nourished’, and a need for ‘an ethical and political practice of alterity that involves a deep concern for social justice, the radical plurality of all beings, and nonhierarchy’ (Escobar 2017, p. xiv). These are the requirements for twenty-first century design education, educating critical practitioners for a complex and challenging world. This requires maturity, focus, openness, enthusiasm, authenticity, courage and, yes, resilience – in both staff, students and the industry with which we open up these new futures together. It is ironic that it has taken a global pandemic for us to see this clearly and to witness the germination of the new in design education.



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