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Unlearning Obedience: Reframing Assessment to Foster Creative Risk

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Abstract

Authority and obedience have long shaped the foundations of higher education and conventional understandings of knowledge acquisition. In design education, however, the capabilities most often associated with innovation, including adaptability, divergent thinking, collaboration and creative risk-taking, can sit in tension with assessment systems that reward compliance, predictability and risk minimisation. This paper presents a pedagogical proposition that reframes these capabilities as forms of intelligent disobedience and considers their relationship to contemporary assessment practices. Drawing on student experience data, evidence-informed personas and a speculative classroom scenario, we use speculative design as a mode of pedagogical inquiry to explore tensions between institutional aspirations, learner agency and assessment structures. Through this reflective lens, the paper considers how assessment may enable or constrain creative risk-taking in design education and examines the implications of these tensions for assessment design. We propose that competency-based assessment (CBA) may offer an alternative to traditional numerical grading by creating greater space for experimentation, revision and learning through failure. In doing so, CBA may better align assessment practices with the forms of adaptability, criticality and creative risk-taking that design education seeks to cultivate.

Keywords: Design Education, Competency-Based Assessment, Creative Risk-Taking, Assessment Design, Design Pedagogy

Introduction

As creative educators, we strive to empower our students to generate innovative and meaningful contributions to the world. In design higher education, this ambition demands pedagogical and assessment approaches that foster capabilities such as adaptability, divergent thinking, collaboration and creative risk-taking. The pedagogical proposition presented in this paper frames these capacities as forms of disobedience that stand in contrast to the rigid and predefined structures that often characterise contemporary

assessment design. While the above capabilities are widely valued by institutions as graduate attributes, we argue that traditional grading systems, particularly those based on numerical marking, may inadvertently discourage their development. We therefore propose competency-based assessment as an alternative framework that allows space for the forms of disobedience that design education seeks to cultivate.

As Paulo Freire (1972) reminds us, true learning cannot exist within obedience, instead thriving in environments that embrace disobedience as a catalyst for innovation. While Freire's arguments focus on broader areas such as the political systems and hierarchical relations in education, his critique of the *banking model* provides an important starting point for considering how educational structures position students in relation to authority and knowledge. Freire's critique is particularly relevant to our consideration of assessment, where educators define expectations for valid performance and students are incentivised to reproduce them. Rather than promoting rule-breaking or behavioural disruption in the strictest sense, we define disobedience within the context of creative education as the practice of critically challenging assumptions, questioning norms and the departure from expected pathways in the pursuit of innovation and deep learning. In this sense, the student becomes the subject of their own learning rather than an object acted upon by educational authority or institutional mechanisms of assessment. In preparing graduates who move beyond conventional thinking, educators must critically reflect on how assessment can encourage or constrain the development of the skills, knowledge and capabilities required for impactful professional practice. We propose that assessment practices move beyond measuring outcomes and towards cultivating the capacities that enable creative impact.

Our pedagogical proposition explores the characteristics of student disobedience and creative innovation through a speculative student persona and classroom scenario. Informed by student experience data and our reflections on the competency-based assessment design of a first-year design studio at UNSW Sydney, we developed a hypothetical vignette to interrogate how disobedience may challenge traditional classroom dynamics and explore how assessment design can shape opportunities for creative risk-taking. The speculative scenario offers a reflective lens through which to consider how disobedience may shape peer and individual learning. The scenario foregrounds tensions that exist between institutional ideals of innovation and the pragmatics of assessment structures. Our reflection on pedagogy through this lens highlights the need for assessment design that emphasises process alongside outcome to create environments that foster resilience, innovation and lifelong learning in student designers. Specifically, the pedagogical proposition of this paper advocates for competency-based assessment (CBA) as a potentially effective framework for curriculum design that supports students to unlearn obedience and embrace rigorous experimentation and divergent thinking as core learning outcomes.

Literature Review and Methodology

Historically, Western education systems were designed to promote understandings of discipline, obedience, and acceptance of norms as tools for social control (Paglayan, 2024). Despite waves of resistance and reform, these traits persist as structural byproducts of institutionalised learning (Paglayan, 2024). In contemporary higher education, obedience

manifests in subtle ways: students sitting quietly in lectures, respecting the hierarchy of teacher-student relationships, following instructions, and meeting deadlines. While some of these behaviours are necessary, such as adhering to codes of conduct, obedience can also produce unintended consequences, especially in fields where innovation or novelty is sought, such as design education.

One such example is within context of assessment in design higher education, where notions of obedience can incentivise students to comply with rules to secure grades, rather than take on uncertain challenges (Smith, 2019; Kohn, 2013). This transactional concept of assessment is particularly problematic when learning outcomes intend to prioritise divergent thinking and creative proposals for characteristically underdefined problem settings (Rauth, 2010). In these situations, the pursuit of numerical marks overshadows the real goal of design education: to prepare future practitioners who respond to ambiguity with creative confidence, empathy and adaptability (Beghetto et al., 2021; Gallagher & Savage, 2022; Rauth, 2010).

Standards-based grading (SBG) systems reinforce this dynamic by prioritising quantifiable performance indicators and final outcomes. This creates a competitive atmosphere where marks are “made artificially scarce” (Kohn, 2013, p.148). Within this framework, failure becomes stigmatised as a reflection of ability rather than a vital component of creative practice (Smith, 2019). This narrow perception of failure discourages risk-taking and limits students’ creativity by instilling in them a fear that experimentation that does not go to plan may not ‘pay off’ in higher marks (Smith, 2019; Ponticell, 2003). In turn, students are unintentionally incentivised to adopt conservative approaches and recycle familiar, safe ideas and methods, narrowing opportunities for authentic learning (Kohn, 2013).

These dynamics are particularly problematic in design pedagogy, which values ambiguity, iteration, and experimentation as core principles in the education of design professionals (Cross, 2023). Creative risk-taking, which Beghetto et al. (2021) term “intelligent risk taking”, is central to design thinking, enabling students and practitioners to challenge assumptions and generate innovative solutions (Brown, 2009). Design history provides numerous examples of practitioners whose work questioned prevailing assumptions and redefined disciplinary expectations. From Zaha Hadid’s fluid architectural forms that “challenged the conventional approach to architecture” (ArchDaily, 2025, 3:43), to the Memphis Group’s rejection of standardisation (Memphis Milano, n.d.), to Jamie Reid’s punk graphic designs that defied the political status quo (Hudson-Miles, 2023), innovation frequently involves a capacity to challenge accepted norms. If this capacity is fundamental to professional design practice, educators must consider the role of learning environments in cultivating forms of critical and creative disobedience in students.

To prepare design students as innovative professionals, our intent is to prioritise abilities such as creative risk-taking, challenging norms, and strategic pivoting, which are central to contemporary design thinking and practice (Brown, 2009). Developing these skills requires students to manage and harness a degree of disobedience in a way that maximises learning opportunities. We frame this strategic approach to disobedience through characteristics

emphasised in the literature on "intelligent disobedience": courage to take risks; strong autonomous drive; intelligent awareness and drive to work with others (McGannon, 2018; Chaleff & Zimbardo, 2015). Figure 1 illustrates the alignment between the characteristics of intelligent disobedience and the graduate capabilities educators at UNSW Sydney aim to cultivate in student designers (UNSW, 2025). These relationships suggest that many of the capabilities that educators seek to foster in graduate designers, including creativity, collaboration, criticality and adaptability, may be understood as forms of intelligent disobedience. In this sense, disobedience can be seen as fundamental to the kind of learning that we aim to deliver, and which enables students to move beyond familiar ways of thinking. The significance of this alignment is not that institutions explicitly promote disobedience, but that many of the qualities that the institution values require students to challenge assumptions, navigate uncertainty and move beyond prescribed pathways. Our concern is that assessment structures do not always support the development of these capabilities, despite their prominence in institutional aspirations. It is this tension between idealised graduate outcomes and learning environments that prompted us to interrogate how assessment grading design encourages, recognises and rewards these crucial and "disobedient" capabilities.

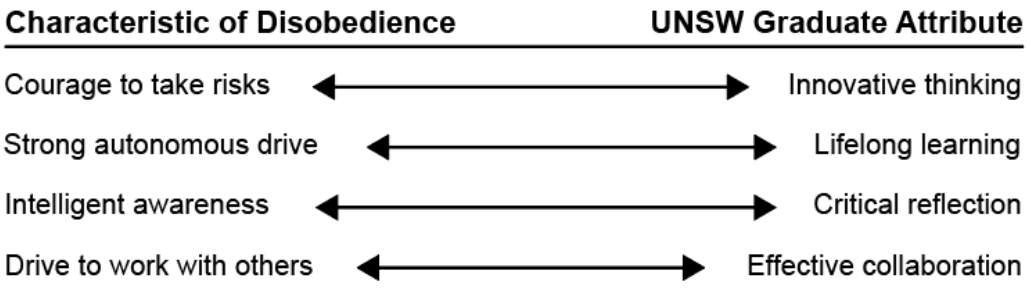

Figure 1: Table showing characteristics of disobedience derived from McGannon, 2018 and Chaleff & Zimbardo, 2015, aligned to UNSW's graduate capabilities (UNSW, 2025).

Speculative design as a reflective lens

To explore the implications and value of disobedience in a contemporary design education setting, we adopted speculation not as a means of proposing alternative futures or producing provocative artefacts, as is common within speculative design, but rather as a mode of pedagogical inquiry. Speculative design as a methodology has been known to create conditions through which assumptions, relationships, and possible consequences become available for critical examination. While critical design has frequently operated through designed artefacts that provoke debate, as in the case of Dunne & Raby (2013), design fiction and diegetic prototyping demonstrate how speculative propositions can also be situated within narrative worlds, allowing social implications to be explored through context, dialogue, and interaction (Kirby, 2010). Recent works have similarly extended speculation towards experiential and pedagogical inquiry, emphasising its capacity as a methodology to expose relationships, values, and tensions that may otherwise remain implicit (Elsden et al., 2017; Bendor & Lupetti, 2025) particularly when related to world-building through storytelling (Willis and Anderson, 2013).

In a hybrid speculative design approach, we combined evidence-informed personas with a critical speculative persona, using their dialogue as a reflective lens to explore how assessment structures may enable or constrain creative learning. The speculative exercise does not seek to validate findings derived from student experience data. Rather, those data provide a point of departure for constructing personas and tensions that can be explored through narrative speculation. The resulting scenario presents a deliberately hypothetical encounter, developed in collaboration with generative AI, through which relationships between assessment structures, student dispositions, creative risk-taking, and peer dynamics can be considered. The methodological value of the scenario therefore lies not in its predictive accuracy or evidentiary status, but in its capacity to make tensions within contemporary assessment practice visible and available for critique and reflection. This paper is a pedagogical proposition informed by student experience data and a real assessment intervention. It does not seek to evaluate the outcomes of that intervention. Rather, it uses personas derived from student experience data alongside speculative design methods to explore the pedagogical implications of CBA and creative risk-taking in design education.

Crafting the scenario

We began by developing evidence-informed personas that represent common student profiles synthesised from qualitative and quantitative student experience data collected across 2024 and 2025, alongside ongoing teaching observations (Williams et al., 2025; Martinez et al., 2025). Personas are a widely used design thinking tool that describe fictional yet evidence-based representations of typical users (Dam & Siang, 2025; Allabarton, 2024). The surveys gathered insights into students' motivations, approaches to learning, experiences of assessment structures and responses to creative risk-taking. Student responses were reviewed using a combination of inductive and deductive interpretation and synthesised into representative learner archetypes. The personas are not intended as empirical findings, but as design tools for reflecting on patterns observed across student experiences. While simplified for the purposes of speculative inquiry, the personas of *The Gradehound* (GH) and *The Peerkat* (PK) were informed by recurring motivational and behavioural patterns identified through the student surveys. For a more in-depth description of GH and PK, see Williams et al., 2025.

Then, to extend these evidence-based personas into speculative inquiry, we developed a critical speculative persona, *The Disobedient Designer* (DD), and positioned it in dialogue with them within an imagined educational scenario. The critical speculative persona embodies the characteristics of disobedience identified in Figure 1. Rather than representing a typical student, DD functions as a deliberately intensified speculative construct whose practice foregrounds risk-taking, autonomy, critical reflection, collaboration and intrinsic motivation. Resilient, empathic and curious, DD actively seeks challenge, pursues personally meaningful goals and values rigorous feedback as a means of improving their practice. They contribute meaningfully to peer critique to strengthen their critical skills. In this way, the persona represents the graduate capabilities we argue can emerge when assessment structures actively support risk-taking, intrinsic motivation, criticality and collaboration.

Positioning DD in dialogue with GH and PK created a speculative encounter through which

tensions surrounding assessment, creative risk-taking and student learning could be explored. Rather than predicting outcomes or validating findings, the importance of this dialogue is as a reflective device that makes visible competing orientations towards assessment, experimentation and collaboration. The three student typologies are summarised in the table below (Figure 2).

Persona	Characteristics/Traits/Behaviours
The Disobedient Designer (DD)	• Thrives on curiosity and risk. • Intrinsically motivated • Playful and experimental • Collaborative
The Gradehound (GH)	• Desires clear, quantifiable outcomes • Extrinsically motivated • Methodical and technically • Competitive even in collaborative settings
The Peerkat (PK)	• Wants to take risks but fears failure more • Requires clear expectations and kind feedback • Sensitive and perfectionistic • Collaborative for reassurance

Figure 2. Characteristics of the evidence-informed student personas (GH and PK) and critical speculative persona (DD) used within the speculative scenario.

All three personas were then placed together within a speculative classroom scenario to explore how disobedience might influence peer interactions within a standards-based grading system. Rather than constructing the dialogue directly, we used generative AI as a scenario-generation tool to stage an encounter between our researcher-defined personas (Figure 3). This approach introduced a degree of productive distance between the pedagogical proposition under investigation and its narrative expression, allowing the resulting scenario to be considered as a speculative artefact rather than a direct authorial argument. Consistent with Tharp and Tharp's (2018) notion of speculative artefacts as intellectual prostheses, the scenario functions as a device for provoking reflection on student learning, assessment and creative risk-taking.

The value of the speculative encounter lies not in demonstrating how students will respond to CBA, but in asking what becomes visible when different orientations toward assessment are placed in relation to a deliberately intensified model of creative disobedience. As a generative tool, speculation operates as a bridge between empirical observation and pedagogical reflection, enabling consideration of classroom dynamics that may not be immediately visible through student experience data alone.

SCENARIO:
Students are gathered around a table, working on a group project. THE DISOBEDIENT DESIGNER (DD) is dismantling a toaster. THE GRADEHOUND (GH) sits with a laptop open to the assessment brief. THE PEERKAT (PK) trims cardboard quietly, anxious about the conversation that's about to unfold.

GH:
DD, reminder — the project's due next week. Please upload your section on materials lifecycle. And maybe… let's not drift too far from the sustainability brief? I'm stressed just watching you. Have you even looked at the rubric? No structure — how does that even work?

PK (HALF-WHISPERING WHILE CUTTING):
DD's trying to understand how people feel about their stuff. I think it's brave... but what if the tutor asks how it meets the learning outcomes? What if we don't have an answer? And if DD gets praised for rebellion, does that make the rest of us look unimaginative?

DD:
Objects hold memory. We keep designing for efficiency, never for attachment. Maybe sustainability begins with sentiment.

GH (SCROLLING THROUGH THE RUBRIC):
That's poetic, but you're pulling focus from what it says here in the brief. We still need to show measurable evidence of impact. Sentiment isn't an outcome you can tick here.

PK (HESITANT, INSPIRED):
Maybe it could be — if we frame it right? Like emotional longevity as part of sustainability?

DD (EYES BRIGHT):
Exactly. Design as care, not just repair.

GH:
It's interesting but risky. What if it doesn't pay off? What if we miss the mark?

DD:
Risk is where design lives! Aren't we sick of doing the same thing?

GH (MUTTERING):
Fine. As long as you can explain that on the poster.

PK (SMILING NOW, BUOYED BY THE EXCHANGE):
At least we're all in this together? Right?

CLOSE SCENARIO:
DD continues dismantling the toaster. Wires scatter across the table as the students continue to discuss the possibilities.

Figure 3. Speculative scenario of an in-class discussion between The Disobedient Designer, The Gradehound and The Peerkat. Generated in collaboration with OpenAI generative AI, ChatGPT Version 5.1, November 2025

Discussion

This speculative scene foregrounds the relational dimensions of disobedience within design education. The Disobedient Designer's creative risk-taking introduces tension between institutional aspirations for innovation and divergent thinking and the practical constraints of rubrics, assessment criteria and predefined deliverables. The scenario situates disobedience within a network of relationships between students, assessment structures and educational authority and in doing so, invites reflection on how different orientations towards assessment may shape student responses to ambiguity, experimentation and creative risk.

Through the interaction of the three personas, the scenario makes visible competing understandings of what constitutes success within design education. The Gradehound prioritises clarity, accountability and measurable outcomes, while The Disobedient Designer privileges experimentation, uncertainty and the possibility of unexpected discoveries.

Positioned between these two orientations, The Peerkat highlights the tensions that can emerge when students navigate competing expectations regarding creative risk-taking and assessment. The significance of the interaction lies in exposing the negotiations that occur when different approaches to learning are brought into dialogue with assessment structures.

This tension returns us to Freire's (1972) concern with the relationships between learners and educational authority. While not depicting an overt challenge to institutional power, the scenario raises questions about how assessment structures shape the boundaries of student agency. In this sense, disobedience emerges not as rule-breaking, but as a willingness to challenge prescribed pathways and negotiate the expectations embedded within assessment systems. Through this speculative exploration we invite educators to consider not whether disobedience belongs in design education, but how learning environments can accommodate it without destabilising the conditions for learning.

The scenario also invites reflection on the role assessment structures play in shaping how students perceive the value of creative risk-taking. When assessment explicitly supports and rewards experimentation, unconventional approaches become strategic pathways for learning and innovation. Conversely, when assessment is perceived to reward compliance and minimise failure, students may be more inclined to adopt safe and predictable approaches rather than engage in the forms of intelligent disobedience required for innovation (Smith, 2019; Beghetto, 2021; Kohn, 2013). As Den Dekker observes, "Design thinking can conflict with the way we learned stuff at school" (Den Dekker, 2020, p. 20), highlighting the tension between exploratory design processes and traditional assessment structures inherited from previous experiences of schooling. This calls for a critical re-examination of how learning is evaluated. We argue that, if intelligent disobedience is necessary for innovation, assessment structures must be intentionally designed to encourage, recognise and value these qualities rather than inadvertently reinforcing compliance and risk avoidance.

A case for competency-based assessment

Our pedagogical reflections are grounded in the implementation of CBA within a first-year design studio. While student outcomes from this implementation are reported elsewhere (Martinez et al. 2025), here we consider how the structure of CBA might create conditions for creative risk-taking and intelligent disobedience.

Competency-based assessment (CBA) offers a compelling pedagogical framework for cultivating the conditions necessary for intelligent disobedience by shifting the emphasis from competitive grading to process-oriented learning. Rather than encouraging students to optimise their behaviour for grades, CBA prioritises the mastery of clearly defined competencies (Townsley & Schmid, 2020; Kohn, 2013). In doing so, it creates space for students to question assumptions, pursue unconventional directions and take creative risks without the immediate fear of academic penalty. When structured through the approach of Mastery Grading (Townsley & Schmid, 2020; Kohn, 2013), CBA is intended to support students in meeting key learning outcomes through rigorous formative feedback and repeated opportunities to revise work before final assessment. These opportunities are particularly important because they reduce the consequences of failure, enabling students

to engage in experimentation and forms of intelligent disobedience that might otherwise be perceived as too risky within traditional grading systems. This is particularly significant in design education, where iterative cycles of feedback, critique and refinement underpin the design process. By reframing risk and failure as integral to learning, rather than indicators of poor performance, CBA encourages students to challenge assumptions, explore unconventional ideas and engage in iterative design processes without fear of grade penalties. As Beghetto (2021) notes, “taking creative action requires taking the risk of making mistakes and even failing,” (p. 638), while Kadyirov et al. (2024) similarly identify “intelligent risk-taking is a prerequisite for creativity” (p. 4). By reducing the fear of failure associated with high-stakes grading (Harland et al., 2015), CBA may support the development of a growth mindset (Kelly, 2020; Dweck, 2006) and the confidence required for students to learn from failure, engage in intelligent disobedience and take the creative risks necessary for innovation in design.

As a practical example of how CBA can be implemented to achieve these goals, we applied a satisfactory and unsatisfactory grading format in FADA1010, Design Collaboration Studio, a first-year, core design studio course at UNSW Sydney. The assessment design emphasised the importance of the design journey by asking students to capture their iterative design process in a journal. This documentation included concept exploration and ideation, design sketching and model-making processes, research into precedents, collaborative activities, feedback, and critical reflections on success and failure. Students received weekly formative feedback from peers and tutors and were encouraged to repeatedly revise work ahead of summative assessment. A re-submission opportunity was provided for any student who received unsatisfactory for the first assessment task. This acted as a safety net, allowing students to learn from this early failure, act on feedback and revise their work to a satisfactory standard before continuing with the course. By shifting focus from numerical marks to process and experimentation, and providing opportunities for revision and resubmission, CBA reframes risk and failure as essential to learning, fostering a safe space for exploration without punitive penalties.

Critical Reflection and Limitations

Yet, there remains the question of how CBA structures that encourage creative risk-taking are experienced by different students. Learning environments that create space for experimentation and forms of disobedience may not be experienced equally by all students. Students differ in their tolerance for ambiguity, confidence in navigating uncertainty, and the consequences that academic failure may hold for them. At the same time, CBA may offer advantages for diverse learners by reducing the high-stakes consequences of failure, offering opportunities for revision, and framing learning as a developmental process that may look different for each individual (Kohn, 2013; Townsley & Schmid, 2020; Harland et al., 2015). These considerations suggest that creative risk-taking and disobedience must be carefully scaffolded through clear expectations, formative feedback and supportive learning environments. Rather than eliminating structure, CBA may offer an alternative form of structure that supports experimentation while better aligning assessment practices with the capabilities that design education seeks to cultivate.

Furthermore, there is a deeper tension that concerns the relationship between assessment,

agency and educational authority; educators define what constitutes valid performance through assessment design, and students learn to recognise and reproduce those expectations. CBA does not suddenly render the classroom Freirean, as competencies and assessment frameworks remain institutionally defined and students are ultimately subject to evaluation. The distinction lies not in the removal of authority, but in how authority is enacted through assessment structures. In this sense, CBA may reconfigure some of the conditions through which assessment produces compliant behaviour by creating greater scope for students to exercise agency within an institutional structure that nevertheless remains hierarchical. This returns us to Freire's (1972) concern with the relationship between learners and educational authority and raises an important question for design education: does CBA genuinely redistribute agency, or does it simply change the kinds of behaviours that are recognised and rewarded? The speculative scenario similarly raises questions about the nature and limits of disobedience. How much of the Disobedient Designer's agency is genuinely autonomous, and how much remains bounded by institutional expectations?

On the limitations of our methods, there is an inherent contradiction in using generative AI, a system designed to produce statistically probable and conventionally coherent responses, to help craft a scenario centred on disobedience. Arguments can be made that forms of disobedience may emerge from systems grounded in obedience, albeit within the confines of their understanding of those implications (Arnold et al, 2022). From this perspective, the use of AI becomes both a contradiction and mirror of the paper's broader concern with the relationship between conformity, agency and disobedience within educational systems. The speculative scenario therefore seeks to foreground this tension, rather than resolve it.

Conclusion

Ultimately, creative education faces a fundamental paradox where institutions seek innovation while assessment systems often reward compliance and conformity. Through the use of evidence-informed personas, a critical speculative persona and a speculative scenario as a reflective lens, this paper explores how creative risk-taking requires forms of intelligent disobedience that challenge conventional expectations of educational obedience. Rather than evaluating the outcomes of CBA, the paper uses speculative design methods to examine the tensions that emerge between institutional aspirations, assessment structures and learner agency.

Competency-Based Assessment may offer one pathway for addressing these tensions by valuing experimentation, revision and process alongside outcomes. If design education seeks graduates capable of questioning norms, navigating uncertainty and imagining alternative possibilities, assessment must do more than evaluate adherence to the guidelines. It must create the conditions in which students can safely experiment, learn from failure, and develop the confidence to engage in creative risk-taking. This paper therefore proposes CBA as an assessment framework that may better align assessment practices with the adaptability, criticality, divergent thinking and creative risk-taking that design education seeks to cultivate.

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Dr. Haider Akmal: Dr Haider Akmal is a speculative designer and educator working at Art & Design UNSW, Sydney. Associated with the Creative Robotics Lab, Creative Technologies Research Lab, and Imagination Lab (Lancaster, UK), his work revolves around more-than human practices in design and education, research through design, ludic design, and design futures.