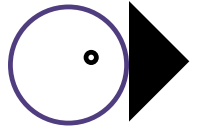


2. REFLECTING OUR PEDAGOGIES

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Learning to unlearn

The following text is an excerpt from I05 Orientation Unit. Learning to Unlearn and a presentation at E1 Dissemination Event Anticipatory Actions, 29 November 2021, 1400-1800 CET.

I05 Orientation Unit. Learning to Unlearn

We wish to offer some insights around the pedagogical ethos that informs the FUEL4DESIGN project, and which is found more explicitly consolidated in the Orientation Unit in I05. This unit was conceived as the foundation of our proposed Futures Literacies Methods journey to offer guidance to those engaged in teaching future design literacies. Its key purpose is to assist us, educators and facilitators, in the work of deconstructing our prior learning, while reflecting on, and continuously evaluating our teaching practice.

We envision this Unit as a space for the sharing and exchange of our own knowledge and experience with the group, so that we all can give and receive feedback through presentations, discussion, micro-teaching, peer observation in an atmosphere of mutual support and solidarity ([Link ↗](#)). A sustained practice of self-reflection is always needed for our teaching practice to resonate fully with the learning environment we operate in. Nevertheless, self-reflection becomes even more significant and necessary when our remit is to work as educators across design, futures and literacies.

This territory, with its multiple transdisciplinary intersections, demands of us that we position ourselves not as external representatives with 'content to deliver' but as co-agents fully implicated in the learning process, and acknowledging that this process is highly transformative for everyone involved.

Thus, the first pillar around which the Orientation Unit is built is the idea that for education to be engaged with future-making, thus genuinely transformative, our teaching practice cannot be disjointed from the work of positionality.

The Present of Future-making

Today's design education landscape (at least in the UK) is increasingly goal-oriented, metric-driven, and substantially shaped by the (perceived, speculative, constructed, fictional) rewards that 'the future' is expected to bring to the key stakeholders the learners (as

consumers). Such talks of 'the future', especially when framed through the narratives of employment opportunities and professional success, may have the detrimental effect of pre-empting learners' potential and of funnelling their energies and agency into what appears to be the most strategic and opportunistic directions. In this context, education risks being marred by a displacement manoeuvre that, in its focus on a fictional 'future', ends up neglecting the present, what is shared right now. Put differently, we ask: How do we keep hold of the present (this present) when we work on futures literacies?

One answer comes from activist and educator bell hooks, who in her book *Teaching Community. A Pedagogy of Hope* writes:

Teaching students to be fully present, enjoying the moment, the Now in the classroom without fearing that this places the future in jeopardy: that is essential mindfulness practice for a true teacher (Hooks, 2003, 173). (SEE Reference 1)

What hooks prompts us to reflect upon is simple: not to lose track of what is unfolding in our present, in our everyday practice, right in front of our eyes, and remind ourselves to see transformation as a trajectory that may be slow, imperceptible, irregular, non-linear, chaotic even. We take her words as an invitation to pay attention to the process in the present, rather than to its expected outputs in the future.

Staying in the present is also, to quote Donna Haraway (2016) (SEE Reference 2), an exhortation to 'stay with the trouble', to actively craft spaces for exchange and the kind of growth that only a commitment to genuine risk-taking can yield.

This approach to teaching is precisely what the Orientation Unit is about. To be engaged in the creation of a learning environment where those intersections of design, futures and literacies can thrive by mobilising (and contesting) the existent, is an active and continuous process. This process demands of us - educators and facilitators an equally active and continuous re-imagining of our practices of teaching.

Unlearning

Through the Orientation Unit, we emphasise the need to be radically open to Unlearning: the willingness to explore different perspectives and change our mind as new and unfamiliar knowledge is presented. This is a fundamental and urgent requirement to make the boundaries of our domain more porous so that divergent modes of knowledge making can be encompassed; as well as being prepared to listen, accept conflict as a generative force and be radically honest, even and especially when it is uncomfortable.

Unlearning: each time we encounter what we don't know, the wager is to 'stay with' divergence. Divergence is what forces us to think differently, to see the world through someone else's eyes, to shed obsolete models and to step into change.

As Madina V. Tlostanova and Walter D. Mignolo observe in the introduction to their volume *Learning to Unlearn. Reflections from Eurasia and the Americas* (2012) (SEE Reference 3)] 'Learning to unlearn in order to relearn' is the fundamental principle in the Amawtay Wasi project.

[The Intercultural University of the People and Nations in Ecuador], where indigenous activists, educators and intellectual work with non-Indians to develop a reflective, intuitive and practical curriculum. This is based on a never-ending open process, where learning is never posed as an outside activity, but is inextricably linked to the relational-experiential connection of 'being', 'existing' and 'doing' (pp. 1-28).

For us, this also means acknowledging that the strength and the vulnerability we need to be open to unlearning must come from many sources. The growing scholarship on decolonisation, delinking and decoloniality is certainly the more relevant, useful and humbling to this aim insofar as it pushes us (white western individuals) to develop the vocabulary and the practical/conceptual tools we need.

Positionality

We believe it is crucial to reflect on our positionality and acknowledge how it impacts on our mindsets and actions, as we foster exchange with our students and peers. The key premise is that in any learning environment no one, ever, comes as an empty vessel. Being an educator is not about facilitating one-way transmission of knowledge, neither wishing to impose a blueprint that is the same for everyone.

Teaching is a complex and highly contextual activity bringing together people, texts, images, locations, objects, technologies, and methods in many different ways. These gatherings are situated, multifaceted, emergent, and therefore unique, requiring us to question the notion of best practice and replace it with openness to multiplicity and difference (Bayne et al., 2020). (SEE Reference 4).

Our role is to foster an enriching ex-change. This is how we enable genuine change. For us this means admitting vulnerability and being prepared to face uncomfortable situations and the difficult questions, they will bring. It means admitting that exchange can be difficult, especially when it takes us out of our comfort zone, when the positionality of others questions our positionality, our institutional role, our privilege.

Artist and activist Kai Syng Tan in her recent keynote at ELIA conference titled 'Tentacular Pedagogy' (SEE Reference 5) made an important point: if things are good for you, and everything is fine, you are the problem.

This is the work we advocate with this Unit. And that's why it's important to stress the ethos that informs it.

Orientation Unit Ethos

The Unit is underpinned by the principles of collegiality and active participation. Teaching, learning and unlearning are to be framed through a collaborative, participatory, reflective, hybrid and transdisciplinary ethos (SEE Reference 6). The emphasis on positionality does not mean utter relativism nor the attempt to recompose differences into a unified opinion, or to seek a safety blanket where groupthink dominates.

Again, here the exhortation is to 'stay with' divergence. This process also helps us moving beyond the often-limiting notion of inclusivity which tends to assume a binary regime of exclusion/inclusion and is predicated on one side having more weight, more influence, more agency. Ultimately, more power cultural, political, executive.

Instead, positionality means to always foster a space of active participation where all positions can be shared, intersections can be explored, questions can be asked and bridges can be built, so that everyone can cross into each other's spaces and experiences, even if we don't fully understand, relate or agree with them.

The aim is not homogeneity, but constructive divergence.

Aims

The Orientation Unit has three aims:

First, to maintain criticality in how we relate educational theory and practice to our distinct disciplinary knowledges (for instance whether your field is design studies, future studies, engineering, art, interaction design), and how this understanding informs our teaching practice and learning situations. For instance, what strategies do we use to work with groups? How do we build communities? How do we fine-tune received methodologies into effective situated practice?

The second aim is to grow our teaching practice so that it can respond to evolving contexts in the institution, in policy, and in society. For instance, how do we become actively engaged in decolonisation, social, racial and environmental justice and other urgent matters the world is facing? How do we affirm education as a social purpose, which means reflecting on the future of education, not on the future of educators only?

The third aim is to interrogate and demystify our current academic research, language and practice so to be aware of gatekeeping mechanisms, and how they impinge on inclusivity and diversity. For instance, how do we look at different modes of knowledge-production, how do we recognise in-built hierarchies, and asymmetrical modes of communication? How do we challenge the status quo and cultivate an awareness of alternatives?

Safe v. brave spaces?

Every single space in which we exist as trans people, indigenous people, Black (sic) and brown peoples, disabled people, women and femmes, queer people and/or working-class people is a 'brave space'.

That is a reality and really invisible to those who are not pushed to think about their place in society on a regular basis. Marginalised communities might feel unsafe in the dominant culture so every interaction does not come from a place of safety but bravery (Marquez, 2017 quoting Lily Zheng) (SEE Reference 7).

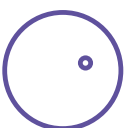
Finally, a note on the images accompanying this piece (shown in the online talk). They come from two workshops we ran in February and March 2020 just before the pandemic hit. You may see them as a relic of the past, with nostalgia, or as a symbol of hope. We wanted to remind ourselves that our educational practice is positioned within a making space, the studio. And we should not forget this, after two years of mostly remote work due to the pandemic. We see the studio as the space where the ethos we have sketched so far can be fully materialised, where those connections are made, those bridges are built, those intersections explored, those positionalities inherent or developed come to the surface. The studio is a creative space both safe and brave for people to take part in exchange, sharing and transformation. Note, however, that 'safe' does not mean being in a group where everyone thinks the same, it does not mean the easy comfort of a bubble. Rather, it means that by actively stepping inside this space we all subscribe to listen, learn and unlearn, even when, and especially when this process stings our core, our principles, our 'way of doing things'.

This is how trust is built so that the vulnerability we have mentioned can be there too, as an integral part of the process that the Orientation Unit wishes to foster.

We conclude with a question: How do you build bridges, and most importantly how do you know if the bridges you are building do facilitate effective 'orientation' processes? Deleuze advises lucidly:

Do not count upon thought to ensure the relative necessity of what it thinks. Rather, count upon the contingency of an encounter with that which forces thought to raise up and educate the absolute necessity of an act of thought or a passion to think (...). Something in the world forces us to think. This something is an object not of recognition but of a fundamental encounter. What is encountered may be Socrates, a temple or a demon (1994, 139).[8] (emphasis added).

To (humbly) paraphrase Deleuze, what is encountered may be our students, our prejudice, or a risky, 'un-safe' situation requiring care, attention, and a commitment to question our own position, entitlement and privilege. For us, this is how educators and facilitators become change-makers, when their practice, teaching, and research are supple enough to unfold in the light of multiple contingencies and escalating crises, and yet sufficiently strong so to engage fully in radical (and non-conventional) transformations towards modes of knowledge-making, teaching and learning, being, existing and doing informed by notions of solidarity, social justice and self-determination.





◀ **Figure 6**
Working with a large class at UAL, FUEL4DESIGN in the Hybrid Futures Lab, 2022. (Image credit: UAL).

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