Design Educators Conference

Proceedings 2025

RGD
SCHOOLOFDESIGN

LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The 2025 Design Educators Conference took place at George Brown Polytechnic which is located on the traditional territory of the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation and other Indigenous peoples who have lived here over time. We are grateful to share this land as treaty people who learn, work, and live in the community with each other.

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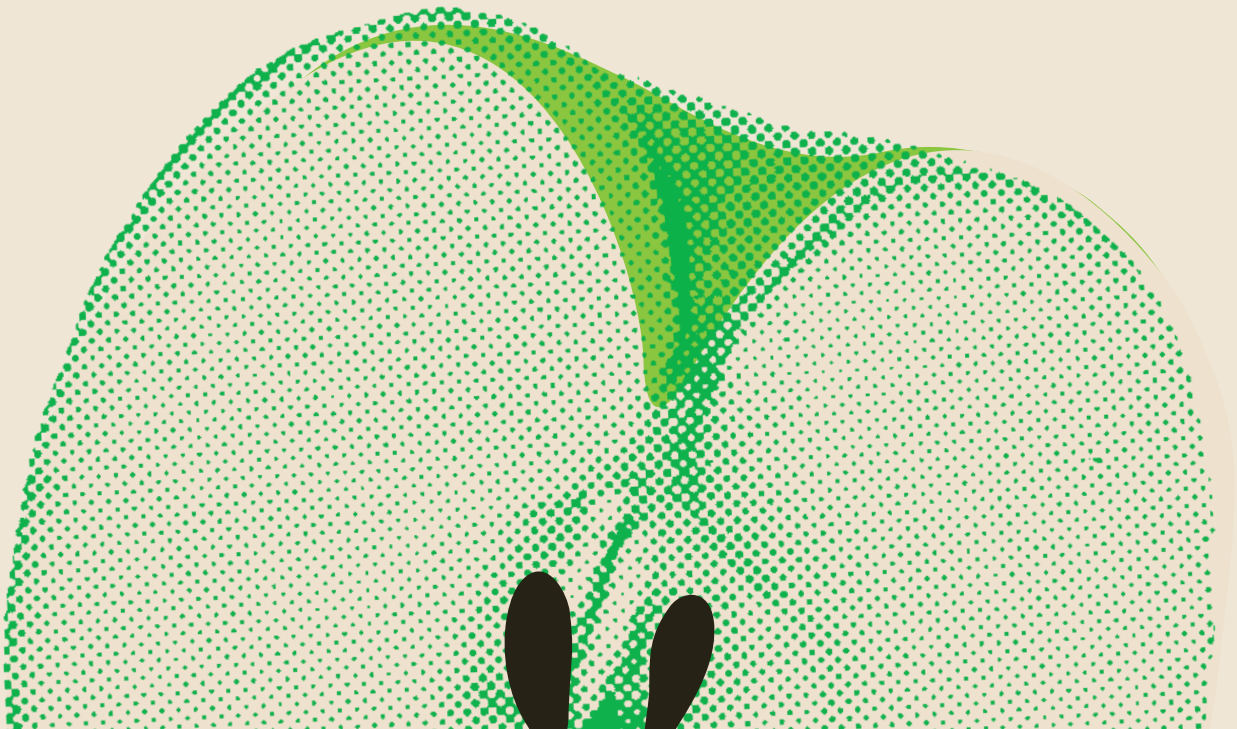


ShiftShaping:

An Introduction to the 2025 Design Educators Conference Proceedings

The 2025 Design Educators Conference (DEC) Proceedings gathers written contributions that extend and deepen the presentations and workshops delivered in Toronto, Ontario, on October 3, 2025. Organized in partnership by George Brown Polytechnic (GBP) and the Association of Registered Graphic Designers (RGD), the conference created a shared space for design educators, researchers, practitioners, and students to take stock of a field in motion and to do so openly, with both urgency and care.

This year's theme, ShiftShaping, underscores a particular stance toward change. Rather than treating instability as a disruption to be managed, ShiftShaping invites us to treat uncertainty as material: a canvas for innovation, a condition that demands experimentation, and a context in which failure can be understood as an active ingredient in learning and evolution.

Within design education, this stance is not rhetorical. It is an everyday reality: classrooms are negotiating emerging technologies, shifting labour conditions, new forms of authorship, and increasingly diverse cohorts whose lived experiences rightly challenge inherited assumptions about who design is for, how knowledge is produced, and what counts as rigor.

The conference opened and closed with keynote provocations that helped frame the tension between inherited structures and urgent futures. Danah Abdulla's, "Design Can, but Design Won't," asked what becomes possible when design education stops producing 20th-century solutions for 21st-century problems—and what it costs to remain fearful of change. Lesley-Ann Noel's, "Designing the Worlds We need Right Now!," grounded this conversation in responsibility and social change, emphasizing design's capacity (and obligation) to support transformation through commitment, time, and collective effort. Together these two keynote addresses frame ShiftShaping as both a critique of inherited norms and a call to act with commitment: to treat uncertainty as a site of invention and experimentation, including failure, as essential to learning and transformation.

HOW THESE PROCEEDINGS ARE ORGANIZED

The DEC proceedings are categorized into five sections that document how educators are reshaping design education in practice. Section 1 foregrounds equity and intercultural pedagogies, asking how teaching can be reoriented through decolonial, Indigenous, and multicultural lenses. Section 2 turns to making, language, and typography as cultural and pedagogical foundations, where form becomes a way of thinking across scripts, contexts, and student knowledge. Section 3 focuses on assessment and motivation, reframing evaluation as a designed system that can enable autonomy, growth, and creative risk. Section 4 explores story, media, and co-design as methods for sensemaking and meaning-making in contemporary learning environments. Section 5 gathers critical provocations that challenge disciplinary boundaries while offering models for inclusive, experiential learning and dialogue.

Together, these contributions form a digital-first, accessible record intended not only to archive the conference, but also to circulate adaptable approaches for educators continuing to shape change beyond the event.

Each section begins with a brief editorial introduction that situates the theme in relation to ShiftShaping and summarizes the questions the contributions take up. Within sections, readers will find a mix of:

- Essays that elaborate on classroom case studies, frameworks, and pedagogical arguments;
- Structured reflections that document teaching strategies, research processes, and lessons learned; and
- Workshop and toolkit entries intended for adaptation, including activities, prompts, and frameworks that can be translated into other institutional contexts.

A SHARED SET OF QUESTIONS

Across the conference themes, several recurring questions emerge. They are not problems to solve once and for all, but tensions to work with. These tensions shape our students, our institutions, and the design profession at large.

- How do we teach otherwise when conventional pedagogical norms reproduce hierarchy, extraction, or deficit thinking?
- What does it mean to treat design learning as relational—to land, community, language, and lived experience—rather than only as individual skill acquisition?
- How do we respond to the ways assessments can either amplify fear or enable growth, especially when risk and experimentation are central to design?
- What kinds of design practice, and what kinds of design education, become possible when we take language, script, and cultural plurality seriously as design material?
- How can we build learning environments that support practice-based knowledge, client relationships, and professional readiness while remaining accountable to equity and inclusion?
- What is the role of critical provocation in the classroom—not provocation for its own sake, but as a method for surfacing assumptions, interrogating systems, and expanding what "counts" as design?

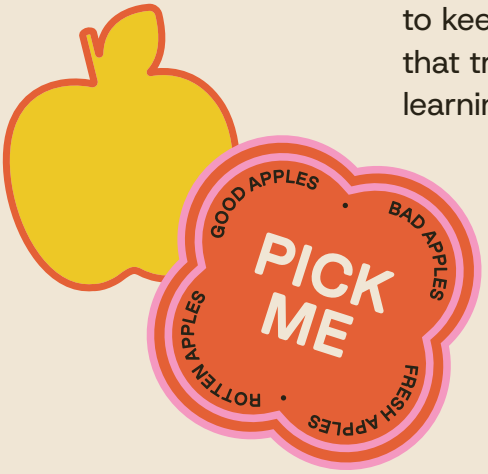
The contributions gathered here respond to these questions from different positions: decolonial and Indigenous pedagogies, multilingual and multiscript typography, alternative assessment and co-designed curricula, narrative and media experiments, studio models and community-engaged work, and critical design as a parallel framework to dominant design-thinking approaches.

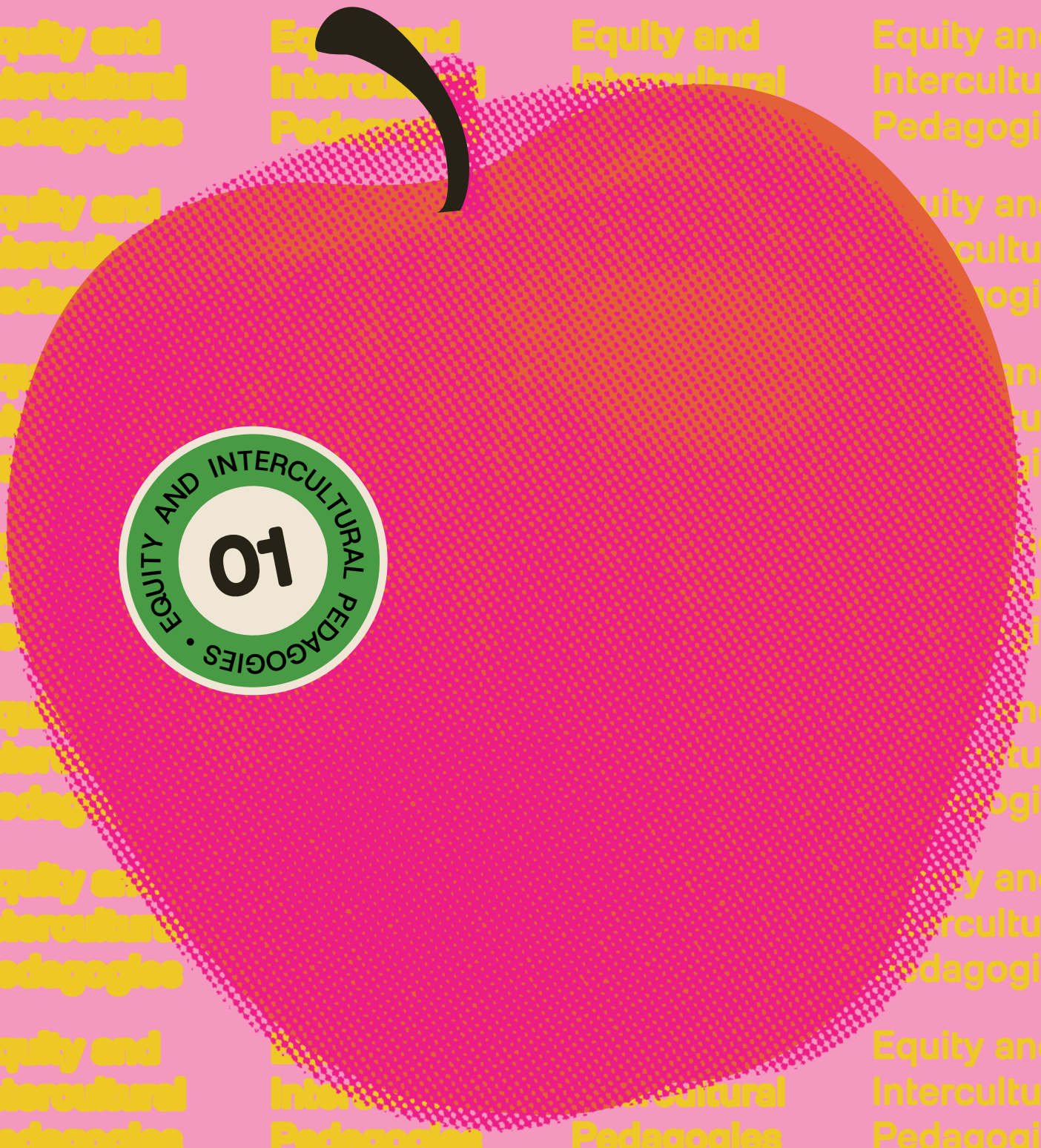
USING THIS PUBLICATION AS A TEACHING RESOURCE

While these proceedings serve as an archival record of the conference, they are also designed for reuse. Readers may approach the text in multiple ways:

- As scholarship, tracing arguments and references across the evolving field of design education;
- As method, adapting workshop structures, research tools, critique prompts, and assessment frameworks; and
- As community practice, using the sections to spark local conversations among faculty, students, and institutional partners about what shifts are already underway and which shifts still need shaping.

In this sense, the proceedings are not a conclusion; they are a continuation. Like the conference itself, they are an invitation to keep testing, revising, and sharing pedagogical practices that treat uncertainty not as a threat but as a condition in which learning and transformation can happen.




EQUITY AND INTERCULTURAL PEDAGOGIES •
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ShiftShaping begins with a fundamental question: who and what is design education for, and what must change for more people to belong, contribute, and thrive? This section brings together contributions that treat equity as more than representation or content; it is a shift in how teaching is practiced, how authority is distributed, and how learning is understood as relational, to land, community, culture, and lived experience.

Across these contributions, readers encounter pedagogical frameworks grounded in decolonial and Indigenous ways of knowing, alongside an examination of multicultural contexts in design education. Collectively, the authors surface how design classrooms can move beyond inherited colonial defaults, how creativity can be understood as emergence through story and place, and how intercultural realities reshape both the "what" and the "how" of teaching. In the spirit of *ShiftShaping*, these contributions position equity not as a destination, but as an ongoing practice—one that asks educators to continually redesign the conditions of learning.

Teaching Otherwise:

A Framework for Shifting Colonial Grounds in Design Education

JANANDA LIMA

NADINE HARE

LINK TO TALK ↗

ABSTRACT

In this paper, we describe how we designed and facilitated a graduate design research course as an experiment in teaching otherwise. Drawing from our experience in the classroom, we argue that decolonial shifts in design education are not simply about adding new methods, but also about reworking relationships in the classroom—that is, reworking how expertise is held, how knowledge is produced, and what forms of vulnerability and accountability become possible. We present a practical framework organized around four principles—collaborative, pluriversal, embodied, and equitable—and illustrate each through teaching gestures, including excerpts from student reflections that reveal how these shifts were experienced and negotiated in practice.

KEYWORDS

Design education
Decoloniality
Relationality

AUTHOR BIO

Jananda Lima is a designer and researcher based in Toronto, Canada. Her practice focuses on decolonial design and community-engaged research, with long-term collaborations with Indigenous, ribeirinho, and favela-based communities in Brazil and Canada. Her work explores how design can support diverse ways of knowing and more equitable relationships between institutions and communities.

Nadine Hare is a medical and design anthropologist based in Toronto, Canada. She is the co-founder of co-being design where she focuses on supporting public health-care organizations in embedding co-design in the work they do. She serves as an Innovation Fellow at Women's College Hospital (WCH) and as Adjunct Faculty at OCAD University and the University of Toronto.

1. Introduction: Coming to Research and Teaching Differently

We were invited to co-teach the Innovation Research Methods course in the graduate Strategic Foresight and Innovation program at OCAD University in Toronto between 2022 and 2025. We entered the classroom with ambivalence.

We (Jananda and Nadine) have an uneasy relationship with design, research, and education. Research has a long history of harm, be it through forwarding colonial views, exclusionary practices, and deficit-thinking (Smith, 2023). When we were graduate students, we struggled to feel at home in academia; we hid parts of ourselves so that we could be seen as "experts." Now, as design researchers, our collaborators (community members from favelas, Indigenous groups from the Amazon, and Toronto) often sigh in disappointment when we tell them that we are researchers, disillusioned by the legacies of our disciplines.

Being invited to teach Innovation Research Methods therefore felt like an opportunity—a radical experiment in doing research, design, and education differently. Together, we asked: What if decolonizing design research was, above all, about decolonizing how we as instructors relate to each other and students? What if learning wasn't only about understanding concepts, but about embodying them? What if the classroom could become a supportive space to experiment with new ways of being?

2. Rationale: Our Inspiration

Our course design was shaped by a set of ideas and thinkers that helped us name what we experienced as being "off" about conventional research and design education.

In his book *Research is Ceremony*, Wilson (2008) reframes research as ceremony: a sacred and relational practice governed by responsibility and accountability. His provocation—that if research does not change you as a person, you are not doing it right—helped us ask parallel questions about teaching. If teaching does not change us, what are we doing? If teaching is relational and accountable, then pedagogy cannot be reduced to technical delivery. What if, as Wilson (2008) may ask, we approached teaching as ceremony?

In *Teaching to Transgress*, hooks (1994) argues that classrooms become sites of engaged pedagogy when instructors only ask students to take risks (including vulnerability) that the instructors themselves are willing to take. For us, this was not a call to perform intimacy in the classroom; it was a reminder that demands for openness can easily become coercive or violent when not held with care or when one-sided.

Third, we drew on pluriversal critiques of design that challenge "one-world" universalisms. Escobar (2018) argues that design has been captured by a Northern, modernist imaginary that assumes a single center and a single horizon of progress, often even when design claims inclusivity. He calls for an ontological reconfiguration of design. For us, this was a call for an ontological reconfiguration of design education.

Machado de Oliveira's (2021) book *Hospicing Modernity* helped us ground this call for reconfiguration and invited us to reflect on the affective and relational feedback loops that shape us. We found the language of the "House of Modernity" (modernity as an affective "house") useful for noticing how our desires (as instructors or students) for control, certainty, and safety come from modernity and shape classroom dynamics. This framing helped us begin to turn inwards, and critically reflect on how our own affective responses to classroom challenges or uncertainties might be reproducing the very structures we are seeking to dismantle. We asked: Can teaching decolonial research happen without challenging modernist myths within us? For example what might learning and teaching look like if we let go of our desire for purity and innocence?

Taken together, these perspectives shifted our attention from knowledge acquisition or mastery to relations. We asked not what concepts mattered, but which worlds and ways of being were made more (or less) possible through our pedagogical choices.

3. A Framework for Teaching Otherwise: Learning as Relational

In this class, students brought significant professional and personal experience, and many arrived with strong familiarity with mainstream design-thinking toolkits and research practices. For us, this context created both possibility and constraint: possibility because students could connect course content to situated practice, and constraint because institutionalized design research norms (e.g., expertise hierarchies, "best practice" toolkits, assessment regimes) can be difficult to interrupt once they are naturalized.

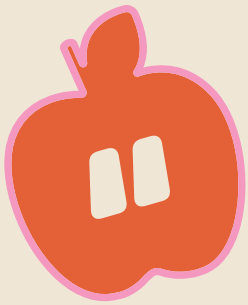
In designing the course, we held two commitments simultaneously. First, we wanted to open space for students to practice research differently—in ways less aligned with extractive, deficit-based, or universalizing habits (Tuck, 2009). Second, we wanted to teach differently from standard practices in design education, especially those that reproduce the instructor-as-expert role and treat knowledge as something delivered rather than co-produced (Freire, 2017).

From this place, we saw the potential to reenvision the classroom as a relational space. If decolonializing research means prioritizing relationships over data, what might prioritizing relationships over information look like in education? We put forward four principles (inspired by the work of decolonization in research) that have helped us teach otherwise: collaborative, embodied, pluriversal, and equitable. In doing so, we believe learning becomes transformational and even joyful—it certainly has been for us.

In the next section, we examine each principle and bring it to life through a concrete practice. We also include students' reflections in their own words, using short excerpts to show how these shifts were experienced and interpreted from within the classroom. We do not see these principles as universal or complete; they are where we landed through co-teaching and iterative adjustment. Our aim is to offer a starting place that design educators can adapt to the conditions in which they teach.

3.1. COLLABORATIVE LEARNING

"From the outset, it was evident that they practiced what they preached, embodying the principles they taught. This authenticity allowed us to feel comfortable making mistakes, learning from them, and growing together. Their ability to blend the personal with the professional in our learning journey created a holistic experience that encouraged us to reexamine our perspectives and assumptions critically. [...] Their courses were a journey of self-discovery and collective learning, enabling us to show up as our full selves and envision the type of professionals we aspire to be."
— Crystal Chan and Marie Succar, students



We therefore approach the classroom as a collaborative space, where "expertise" is shared and co-created.

Decolonial research reminds us that knowledge and expertise are not owned by a select few, but are co-constructed. We therefore approach the classroom as a collaborative space, where "expertise" is shared and co-created. This means actively dismantling hierarchies that position instructors as knowledge-holders and students as passive recipients (de Sousa Santos, 2015). In cultivating this collaboration, both students and instructors become accountable to the learning process and each other.

In practice, we did this by inviting students to co-develop key components of the course. For example, we co-created shared community agreements and co-defined how we want to collectively acknowledge the land at the beginning of each meeting. Furthermore, embedded within each lecture was a "collective learning" component—during this time, we gave students space to apply the theory to a tangible example, and reflect on how it showed up in their daily personal and professional lives. As a group, we then collectively reflected on how students' experiences (inside and outside of the classroom) might help evolve our shared understanding of the topic.

Collaborative learning also means being open to receiving feedback and adapting accordingly. In our first meeting, we let students know that receiving feedback is important to us. We then checked-in on how students were experiencing the course at weeks four, eight, and the final week of class. For example, we heard that students wanted more time to take part in small group discussions (rather than larger group discussions). We adapted our course to give students the time to discuss with a peer before sharing with the larger group. At week eight of the course, we gave students an overview of what was left to come in the final four weeks of the course, and asked

them what else they would like to explore. For example, one year, students hoped to better understand how to explain the value of research in complex organizational contexts—we spent the next meeting exploring this topic.

3.2. PLURIVERSAL LEARNING

"They posited the possibility of spaces where multiple beliefs and experiences could co-exist and seeded many practical ways to participate and enact change [in environmental sustainability, decolonization, and anti-racism]." — Erin Stripe, student

Decolonizing research means challenging a post-positivist research paradigm (one that seeks to uncover the Truth) as universal. It asks us to open space for a world in which multiple socially constructed realities exist. Similarly, we approach the classroom as a pluriversal space—one in which multiple ways of knowing and being can co-exist.

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To do so, we spent the first four weeks of the course helping students understand different research paradigms. We made clear that these paradigms are not inherently "good" or "bad"—instead we focused on exploring the values embedded within each and highlighting what they may allow or limit. We also highlighted how, as instructors, our views and practices differ at times. By showing this tension, the classroom becomes a space of pluriversality.

Once we had introduced students to other ways of being in research, we asked them to apply this critical thinking to their term research projects. For example, one student group developed their own research paradigm based on a Cree concept, drawing on the knowledge and lived experience of a Cree member of the group to express the values they hoped to embed within their work.

In a similar vein, when teaching students how to analyze qualitative data, we presented them with four different techniques and explored the worldviews attached to each tool. From there, we asked students to form groups in which each member applied a different method to analyze an interview transcript. As a class, we then discussed what each technique may highlight and obscure.

3.3. EMBODIED LEARNING

"During class dialogues, it was not about "getting it right" or expressing ourselves perfectly—it was about learning and trying new ways of doing things [...]. I admired and appreciated that as co-instructors, they brought their whole selves into the classroom, sharing their international research and life experiences while remaining so humble and open to feedback along the way" — Zoya Jiwa, student

Transformational learning is about more than information or theory—it requires embodying new or underexplored ways of being.

Decolonizing research and design is first and foremost ontological work (Winograd & Flores, 1986). It requires us to move beyond simply changing the methods/tools we employ, to opening up space for other ways of being. Similarly, **transformational learning is about more than information or theory—it requires embodying new or underexplored ways of being.**

Experimenting with and embodying new ways of relating, requires students to feel safe enough to show up as their full and complex selves in the classroom. Importantly, we believe that this begins with us. A core component of our course is therefore openly sharing our professional failures and personal struggles. For example, in a class on ethics, we began by discussing the ways in which we may have taken part in extractive research in the past, and how we felt trapped in a paradigm that didn't serve us. This gave students the freedom to fail, question their own values, and feel the pain of doing so. It also helped break down traditional power dynamics within the classroom.

We also help students embody learnings by inviting them to reflect on their positionality and practice reflexivity. Before beginning their own research projects, we asked them to undertake a reflection exercise to highlight their assumptions on their chosen topic and uncover how their personal experience shapes their approach to participants, the field, and "data". In addition, course assignments included a personal reflection in which students are asked to refer back to this first exercise, and document how their relationship to the field, the topic, and themselves had shifted. As instructors, we model reflexivity by making clear that our views are also shaped by our social position. For example, while we share how different research traditions might make us hopeful or uncomfortable, we also make clear that our perspective is not "the way", but rather a product of our own complex experiences.

3.4. EQUITABLE LEARNING

"[They] excelled in employing Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles. They provided multiple means of representation for research methods, ensuring all learning styles were accommodated. Assignments were designed with flexibility, allowing us to express our understanding through various formats—whether it be written reports, interactive presentations, or hands-on workshops. As a teacher of special education, I especially appreciated their commitment to UDL principles." — Jennifer Murphy, student

Our methods focus on building a classroom that includes ways of learning that have traditionally been excluded or underexplored in the classroom.

Decolonizing research requires us to recognize who has been traditionally marginalized in the name of research. Similarly, **our methods focus on building a classroom that includes ways of learning that have traditionally been excluded or underexplored in the classroom.**

We foster equity in the classroom by giving students diverse tools to learn with and from—each class has a theoretical (i.e., visual and verbal lectures), written (i.e., curated readings), conversational (i.e., small and larger group discussion), individual reflection, and applied learning component (i.e., in class activities). In assignments, we offer students the freedom to choose the format in which they submit their work.

When reviewing student work our focus is on providing detailed feedback. While grades evaluate learning through a normative and singular scale, feedback enables diverse learners to gain a better understanding of the topic covered and link their application back to their overarching learning journeys. Students group received two to three pages of feedback each.

4. What shifted when we centered relationality

Centering relationality changed what counted as "progress" in the course. Instead of measuring learning primarily through mastery of methods, we looked for shifts in how students articulated responsibility, accountability, and positionality. We also noticed that naming paradigms made conflict and disagreement more

workable: when students could locate an assumption (e.g., about objectivity or evidence) as a paradigm rather than as common sense, conversations became about choice-making as a designer.

Relationality also changed us. We had to examine the affective habits we carry into classrooms: the impulse to control, to fix discomfort quickly, to be seen as competent and "good". Co-teaching supported this work because we could witness one another's patterns and offer support and accountability grounded in trust and care.

5. Risks and Constraints

Teaching otherwise is not a seamless intervention within academia. Institutional architectures—credit hours, assessment practices, curricular norms, and time constraints—shape what can be taught and how. We sought to unsettle these conditions by opening space for an ontological rethinking of design, even as this work unfolded within an institution whose foundational assumptions stood, at times, in tension with that shift.

For example, even when we told students that everyone's grades would be very high, many still worried about their grades because that is what academia has and continues to reward. We also felt the risk of being misunderstood: decentering expertise can be read as a lack of credibility or rigor. This required us to open up space in class to explore what rigor can look like in relational research. It also required us to accept the conditions within which we teach, and become more comfortable with being taken less seriously by some.

We are no longer teaching this course at OCAD University. Due to financial pressures, the course has been cut down to a half credit, meaning that co-teaching cannot be properly compensated. As instructors, transforming how we show up in the classroom is complex affective and spiritual labor. We both felt that this work could not be done in a sustainable manner without having someone to support when triggers inevitably arose or a partner to keep each other accountable through the process.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, we have argued that decolonial shifts in design research education cannot be achieved simply by adding new methods, readings, or toolkits. They require changes in classroom relationships—how expertise is distributed, how knowledge is recognized, and how accountability is practiced. We offered four principles—collaborative, pluriversal, embodied, and equitable—as a framework for teaching otherwise, alongside concrete practices that made these principles legible in the rhythms of everyday teaching.

We hope this framework travels precisely because it is principle-based rather than tool-based. At the same time, we recognize that transfer is never neutral. Collaboration, embodiment, and equity take different forms depending on context, cohort composition, and institutional history. A pluriversal approach in one setting may involve engaging Indigenous research methods; in another, it may require recognizing migrant, diasporic, disabled, or working-class epistemologies that are routinely dismissed as "anecdotal."

For this reason, rather than prescribing a universal template, we offer a question we found durable across contexts: What becomes possible when education is approached not as information transfer, but as a relational, embodied, and accountable practice? Our next step is to continue iterating the framework across new contexts, without treating any articulation of it as final.

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ʻUpu aʻe ke ola:
Creative Emergence Through Indigenous Pedagogy in Design Education

HERMAN PIʻIKEA CLARK

LINK TO TALK ↗

ABSTRACT

ʻUpu aʻe ke ola—words give life. This paper introduces four principles of Indigenous pedagogy that reorient creativity, curriculum, and practice in design education. Grounded in Kanaka Maoli epistemology and resonant across Indigenous contexts, these principles—hoʻolohe (deep listening), hoʻopapa (challenge), hoʻomanawanui (patience), and kuleana (relational responsibility)—are not cultural supplements. They form an alternative foundation for design education. This paper asks: How might Indigenous pedagogical principles reorient creativity, curriculum, and practice in contemporary design education?

Drawing from teaching and research in Canada, Hawaiʻi, and Aotearoa/New Zealand, I show how Indigenous pedagogical practices—Talanoa (dialogue), moʻolelo and koʻihonua (story and genealogy), ʻāina/whenua (land), and kinship teaching figures—reveal creativity as a relational, accountable process. This framework challenges dominant creativity theories rooted in Western psychology and design research, replacing novelty, disruption, and individual achievement with continuity, responsibility, and emergence in right relation.

KEYWORDS

Indigenous pedagogy
Relational creativity
Talanoa methodology
Design education
Visual arts
Land-based learning
Genealogy story

AUTHOR BIO

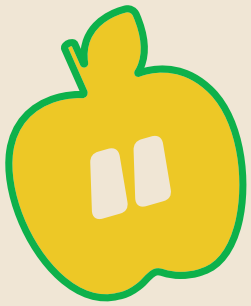
Herman Piʻikea Clark is a Kanaka Maoli artist, designer, and Professor in the Faculty of Design at OCAD University (Toronto). With experience teaching across Indigenous contexts in Aotearoa/New Zealand, Hawaiʻi, Australia, the United States, and Canada, his research and practice explore how Indigenous knowledge systems can reorient design education and institutional decision-making, particularly around criteria, authority, relational accountability, and long-term continuance. His work spans teaching, writing, and community-engaged art, including public projects grounded in genealogy and land.

Introduction: Reframing Design Education Through Indigenous Pedagogy

‘Upu a‘e ke ola—words give life. This paper introduces four principles of Indigenous pedagogy that reorient creativity, curriculum, and practice in design education. These principles—ho‘olohe (deep listening), ho‘opapa (challenge), ho‘omanawanui (patience), and kuleana (relational responsibility)—are described here through a Kanaka Maoli cultural lens but resonate across Indigenous contexts. They are not cultural additions to existing theories of creativity. They form a different ground altogether. This paper asks: How might Indigenous pedagogical principles reorient creativity, curriculum, and practice in contemporary design education? It offers these principles as a practical pedagogical framework for design curriculum, critique, and creative development.

For more than half a century, dominant theories of creativity have been shaped by Western psychology and design research. Amabile (1983) framed creativity through a componential model of individual motivation and domain skill, situating creative achievement within measurable traits of the designer. Csikszentmihalyi (1996) emphasized flow and novelty as markers of optimal personal experience, reinforcing the association between creativity and individual psychological states. Sawyer (2012) theorized creativity as human innovation tied to problem-solving and collaborative dynamics, yet still centered on the generation of new ideas as primary value. These frameworks have been influential and generative, shaping studio culture, assessment rubrics, and professional expectations. However, they share a narrowing premise: creativity as originality, rupture, and novelty, detached from community, land, and responsibility.

In design education, these assumptions become institutionalized. Students are rewarded for disruptive ideas, rapid iteration, and distinct individual voice. Assessment criteria frequently prioritize originality, innovation, and personal authorship. While such emphases can foster experimentation, they can also detach creative practice from inherited context and relational accountability. Creativity becomes something to be produced rather than something to be carried. Such abstractions are not neutral; they shape curriculum, critique, and the very definition of creative success in design education.



Creativity is measured not by novelty but by integrity.

By contrast, Indigenous pedagogy does not locate creativity in the isolated individual or in the pursuit of originality. It situates creativity in webs of relation—among people, ancestors, land, and spirit. Creativity is measured not by novelty but by integrity: continuity across generations, accountability to community, and responsiveness to land. Rather than asking whether an idea is new, Indigenous pedagogy asks whether it is in right relation. This is not an add-on to existing creativity theories. It represents a shift in the epistemological ground on which creativity is understood.

From my experiences teaching and researching in Canada, Hawai'i, and Aotearoa/New Zealand, I illustrate how Indigenous pedagogical practices—Talanoa (dialogue as pedagogy), mo'olelo and ko'ihonua (story and genealogy as epistemology), 'āina/whenua (land as ancestor and teacher), and kinship teaching figures who model accountability and care—make visible a framework of creativity grounded in relation. From these practices emerge four principles that reframe the future of design education.

Indigenous pedagogy shows that creativity is not a solitary achievement but a relational process cultivated in right relation. The future of design education will not be found in new grids or problem-solving models, but in older knowledges that teach us to listen, to challenge, to endure, and to take responsibility.

Theoretical Framework: Indigenous Pedagogy and Relational Creativity

Conventional design education has long drawn on creativity theories that privilege the individual—originality, novelty, and problem-solving as internal traits of the designer (Amabile, 1983; Guilford, 1950; Csikszentmihalyi, 1996). These approaches have been useful, but they abstract creativity from land, culture, and responsibility. Even sociocultural models, such as Glăveanu's (2014) distributed creativity, often assume neutral, universal contexts, rarely accounting for the epistemologies that sustain Indigenous ways of knowing. Such abstractions are not neutral; they shape curriculum, assessment, and the very definition of creative success in design education.

Indigenous pedagogies offer a different ground. Rather than locating creativity in the isolated individual, they situate it within webs of relation—between people, land, ancestors, and community. Creativity is measured not only by its originality but by its integrity within these wider systems, a framework carried through what can be called relational responsibility. In Indigenous pedagogy, responsibility is not an external duty or bureaucratic burden, but a form of accountability held in relationship. It is closer to what Kanaka Maoli describe as kuleana—the privileges and obligations that arise from genealogy, place, and reciprocity. Reorienting design education therefore requires not new techniques, but a shift in the epistemological ground from which creativity is understood.

Kuokkanen (2007) calls this the "logic of the gift": knowledge is never free-floating; it is given and carried in relationship. In Hawaiian contexts, Meyer (2003) emphasizes ʻike kūpuna (ancestral knowing) and ʻike honua (knowing from land) as epistemological anchors. These resonate with what Wilson (2008) describes as relational accountability—the recognition that knowledge is never neutral but bound in relationships to community, land, and ancestors. Taken together, these frameworks suggest that creativity education must be structured not around individual output alone, but around relational processes, inherited responsibilities, and continuity across generations.

Methodology: Talanoa as Pedagogy and Inquiry

This work draws on Talanoa, a Pacific methodology of open-ended, relational dialogue grounded in empathy, trust, and co-construction of knowledge (Vaioleti, 2006). Talanoa is not only a research method but also a pedagogy—a way of creating knowledge that reflects Indigenous values of reciprocity, listening, and care (Faʻavae, 2016; Kovach, 2009; Wilson, 2008). In this paper, Talanoa functions both as inquiry method and pedagogical practice; the principles that follow emerged through sustained relational dialogue rather than formal interview protocols.

Talanoa's pedagogical force often lies in what Western research overlooks: silence, laughter, and vulnerability. Pauses allow time for reflection; laughter builds trust; vulnerability invites honesty. These are not incidental but core conditions for knowledge-making. In my own teaching, moments of quiet gave students courage to speak, laughter dissolved barriers, and shared uncertainty opened creative insight. What might seem informal in Western pedagogy, Indigenous pedagogy recognizes as epistemic. Silence and laughter are not interruptions to learning; they are the rhythm of learning itself.

Talanoa also redistributes authority. Rather than positioning the educator as extractor of knowledge, it positions all participants as co-bearers of responsibility. Knowledge is not gathered from subjects but generated through relationship. This shift alters classroom dynamics: students are not passive recipients of critique but relational participants in shared inquiry. Accountability is mutual rather than hierarchical.

My approach has been shaped by Talanoa sessions and exchanges with Indigenous educators and students in Canada, Hawai'i, and Aotearoa/New Zealand. These encounters were not interviews in the conventional sense, but relational conversations grounded in cultural protocol. They involved shared story, silence, laughter, and vulnerability. Knowledge emerged through these relationships rather than being extracted from them (Archibald, 2008). This approach aligns with Indigenous methodological critiques of extractive research practices (Smith, 1999). Across these contexts, patterns began to recur. These patterns were recognized not as abstract categories imposed through coding, but as shared pedagogical conditions that enabled creative emergence.

Findings: Conditions for Creative Emergence in Indigenous Pedagogy

From these conversations and experiences, several conditions for creative emergence became visible across contexts. These are not abstract themes, but lived pedagogical practices that illustrate how creativity shifts from individual output to relational emergence when grounded in Indigenous pedagogy.

1. GENEALOGICAL GROUNDING

Creativity begins with lineage and story. Students are encouraged to locate themselves in moʻolelo or koʻihonua, affirming that creative expression carries obligations to ancestry and community. In practical terms, this might involve beginning design projects with personal and place-based narrative inquiry rather than problem briefs detached from context. When students understand themselves as situated within genealogy, creativity becomes continuation rather than invention from emptiness.

2. RELATIONAL RESPONSIBILITY

Creativity is measured not by individual achievement but by accountability to others, to place, and to spirit. This echoes kuleana— privileges and obligations inherited from genealogy and land. In curriculum, relational responsibility reshapes assessment. Instead of grading solely on aesthetic innovation, educators consider whether work demonstrates attentiveness to community, collaboration, and consequence.

3. KINSHIP FIGURES

Aunties, uncles, and elders anchor the learning space. Their presence embodies care and discipline, creating the emotional conditions for creativity to flourish. Such braided presence of care, story, and cultural labor has been described as foundational to Indigenous learning environments (Dion, 2022). Pedagogically, this principle encourages educators to model relational authority rather than distant expertise. Creative growth occurs within trusted relational structures.

4. LAND AS ANCESTOR AND TEACHER

ʻĀina/Whenua is not backdrop but living presence. Creative practices are guided by ecological rhythms, seasonal cycles, and material engagements with land. Land-based pedagogies across Indigenous contexts affirm land as teacher rather than resource (Simpson, 2014). Incorporating land-based learning—site visits, material sourcing, environmental attunement—reframes creativity as response rather than imposition.

5. STORY AS STRUCTURE AND SPARK

Mo'olelo is both container and catalyst for creativity. Stories organize knowledge and inspire aesthetic expression, ensuring continuity across generations. Story-centered pedagogy provides narrative coherence and ethical orientation within design practice.

6. CEREMONY OVER PRODUCT

Creativity is often valued not only for outcomes but for restoring balance, honoring memory, and enacting relational ethics. Shifting emphasis from final artifact to process and intention redefines what counts as success.

These conditions operate within and animate the four guiding principles of ho'olohe, ho'opapa, ho'omanawanui, and kuleana, offering a pedagogical framework that shifts design education from novelty-centered production toward relational accountability and continuity.

Four Principles of Indigenous Pedagogy

Threaded through these practices are four guiding principles of Indigenous pedagogy. Described here through a Kanaka Maoli cultural lens, they resonate across Indigenous traditions and offer practical shifts in how creativity is cultivated and sustained.

HO'OLOHE → DEEP LISTENING AND ATTENTIVENESS

Ho'olohe means listening beyond words—noticing pauses, gestures, silences, and subtle signs that carry knowledge. Listening is active and relational, requiring humility and presence. In design classrooms, ho'olohe shifts critique from performance to presence, inviting attentiveness to what emerges between voices rather than competition for visibility.

HOʻOPAPA → CHALLENGE AND TESTING

Hoʻopapa refers to debate, challenge, and testing. Knowledge is sharpened by encounter. In classrooms, hoʻopapa reframes critique as reciprocal testing rather than evaluation, positioning challenge as shared commitment to growth.

HOʻOMANAWANUI → PATIENCE, ENDURANCE, AND THE WISDOM OF SILENCE

Hoʻomanawanui emphasizes the long arc of learning. Silence and waiting are essential conditions for insight. Pedagogically, this principle resists compressed timelines and productivity metrics, allowing space for depth and reflection.

KULEANA → RELATIONAL RESPONSIBILITY

Kuleana grounds pedagogy in obligation. Knowledge carries responsibilities to ancestors, community, land, and future generations. In practice, kuleana redefines creative success as accountable relation rather than individual achievement.

Together, these principles offer a framework rooted in Kanaka Maoli worldview yet resonant across Indigenous contexts. They call for attentiveness, challenge, patience, and responsibility as lived pedagogical practices that sustain creativity, community, and continuity.

Discussion: Rethinking Creativity Through Indigenous Pedagogies

The principles outlined here challenge dominant creativity theories that abstract creativity from land, community, and responsibility. Indigenous pedagogy offers a different ground in which creativity is relational, accountable, and sustained through continuity.

Returning to the central question—how might Indigenous pedagogical principles reorient creativity, curriculum, and practice in contemporary design education?—this paper suggests that reorientation begins by shifting creativity from individual production toward relational emergence. This shift does not discard technical skill or innovation;

rather, it situates them within broader webs of responsibility. When creativity is understood as relational, curriculum expands to include listening practices, genealogical inquiry, land-based engagement, and shared accountability. Assessment shifts from measuring novelty alone to evaluating integrity and continuity. Studio culture moves from competitive display toward collaborative care.

Such reorientation is not a symbolic gesture. It is structural. It changes how projects are framed, how critique is conducted, how timelines are paced, and how success is defined. In this way, Indigenous pedagogy does not merely diversify content; it transforms the ground of design education itself.

Conclusion: Creativity in Right Relation

ʻUpu aʻe ke ola—words give life. The frameworks we inherit shape how we define creativity and how we imagine its futures. Indigenous pedagogies demonstrate creativity as an emergent, relational, and accountable practice carried through story, genealogy, land, kinship, and spirit.

The future of design education will not be secured by new theories of innovation alone. It will be secured by knowledges that teach us to listen, to challenge, to endure, and to take responsibility.

E kaupe aku nō i ka hoe a kō mai.
Put forward the paddle and draw it back.

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Multiculturalism:
Opportunities and Challenges

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LINK TO TALK ↗

KEYWORDS

Multiculturalism
Multilingualism
Multiscript
Typography
Storytelling
Decolonizing
design education

ABSTRACT

The paper shares two related pedagogical approaches for integrating multiculturalism and multilingualism into graphic design curricula, and the theoretical frameworks informing them. Isabel Meirelles examines how to leverage the verbal, vocal, and visual aspects of language to tell stories in different media. Diane Mikhael follows with a deep dive into multilingualism by examining the visible form of language that is typography and its diverse scripts. We illustrate these approaches with practical classroom activities and student outputs from the past three years, and end with a discussion about the opportunities and challenges of multicultural pedagogies in the context of decolonizing design education.

AUTHOR BIOS

Isabel Meirelles is a Professor in the Faculty of Design at OCAD University, Toronto, Canada. Her research focuses on how information is structured, represented and communicated in different media. Isabel is the author of Design for Information: An introduction to the histories, theories, and best practices behind effective information visualizations (Rockport, 2013).

Diane Mikhael is an Associate Professor of Graphic Design at OCAD University. Her research includes multilingual typography, design and culture, design activism, radical futures and new narratives. She is the author of the book Bilingualism in Visual Communication: Visible Forms and Meaning in Arabic and Latin Typography. She is the former President of the Middle East Design Educators Association.

55.7%

of Toronto's total population is racialized

44.9%

of Toronto's residents speak at least one non official language at home

The city of Toronto is often regarded as the most multicultural city in the world, with its racialized population accounting for 55.7% of its total population (Statistics Canada, 2024). According to the city of Toronto 2021 Census, 44.9% of the residents reported speaking at least one non-official language at home. The top non-English languages spoken at home are Mandarin, Cantonese, Tagalog, Spanish and Tamil (City of Toronto, 2021).

Students and faculty at OCAD University reflect the multiculturalism of the city of Toronto. The ethnocultural diversity includes Indigenous and First Nations peoples, and international students, who bring their lived experiences from this land and around the globe. Many students are first-generation Canadians, whose parents migrated to Canada for diverse reasons, including as refugees. These students often speak their parents' language at home, though they may not be able to write it fluently.

This ethnocultural and linguistic diversity extends to faculty as well. The authors, Isabel Meirelles and Diane Mikhael, are themselves part of this diverse community, bringing their own multicultural and multilingual perspectives to their teaching and design work.

How can we embrace this cultural diversity in design education? How can we shift away from a single Eurocentric perspective to a multiplicity of positions? This paper critically examines multiculturalism in the context of decolonizing design education, advancing Priority 5 of OCADU Academic and Strategic Plan to "decolonize and indigenize art and design education and advance equity" (OCADU, 2022).

The paper shares two related pedagogical approaches for integrating multiculturalism and multilingualism into graphic design curricula, and the theoretical frameworks informing them. Meirelles examines how to leverage the verbal, vocal, and visual aspects of language to tell stories in different media. Mikhael follows with a deep dive into multilingualism by examining the visible form of language that is typography and its diverse scripts. We illustrate these approaches with practical classroom activities and student outputs from the past three years, and end with a discussion about the opportunities and challenges of multicultural pedagogies.

Multiculturalism

This section shares approaches for integrating multiculturalism into the curriculum of a second-year graphic design course focused on storytelling in different media. It discusses the "Moving Poetry" assignment that Isabel created for the course to support and value the lived experiences and cultural identities of students.

The assignment draws upon three related pedagogical frameworks that have evolved over the past three decades. Gloria Ladson-Billings's (1995) Culturally Relevant Pedagogy uses students' cultural backgrounds as a vehicle for learning, bridging academic achievement and critical consciousness with cultural competence. Building on Ladson-Billings's foundational work, Django Paris's (2012) Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy extends this approach by recognizing the importance of maintaining students' home cultures while they learn to navigate dominant cultures, thereby fostering cultural and linguistic pluralism. Most recently, Culturally Affirming Pedagogies (Bullen & Adams, 2023) position students' cultural identities and linguistic backgrounds as vital resources for learning rather than deficits to overcome. While this framework was developed primarily in Caribbean contexts, its emphasis on affirming localized epistemologies is particularly relevant to decolonizing design education in Toronto's multicultural landscape.

Given the ethnocultural and linguistic diversity described earlier, these frameworks inform the assignment design in specific ways. By inviting students to work with poetry in their home languages or cultural traditions, the assignment positions their linguistic and cultural backgrounds as valuable knowledge rather than barriers to overcome. For multilingual students, this means they can use this knowledge for creative expression. Students who are monolingual are equally encouraged to explore their own cultural traditions through English-language poetry. In both cases, students engage with how language, culture, and visual form intersect in storytelling, fostering mutual appreciation for the diverse perspectives in the classroom.

THE MOVING POETRY PROJECT

The Moving Poetry project addresses the course's learning outcomes of designing storytelling experiences in different media while nurturing linguistic and cultural pluralism. Students are tasked with expressing the meanings and emotions of a selected poem in the form of a short movie (60–120 seconds) and a printed accordion booklet (3–4 folds). The project encourages students to design from their own cultural standpoints, validating diverse ways of seeing, communicating, and meaning-making.

The inspiration for the project came from *The Universe in Verse* by Bulgarian-born author and critic Maria Popova, particularly her collaboration with Krista Tippett's public radio show and podcast *On Being*, which brought poems to life through animation.

The project begins with students selecting a poem that is meaningful to them. This includes poetry written in their native language or another language they might speak at home. Students then invite a person to read the poem in the original language, and to chat about it. In general, students invite someone close to their upbringing, such as a parent, grandparent, or sibling.

The reader acts as a strong link with their community. As importantly, the reader adds another voice to the work, both literally and metaphorically. The spoken language (the recording) is used as the soundtrack in the movie, setting its tone and pace. The poem in both its original and English translation together with the edited transcript of the interview are reproduced in the booklet (the written word).

For example, Sreya Lizbeth invited her grandmother Nimmy Paul to read the celebrated Indian poem "Mango" by Vyloppilli Sreedhara Menon. Following local tradition, her grandmother sang it in Malayalam, rather than reading it. During the conversation, Nimmy Paul shared memories of the poem and the fruit, all of which is reproduced in the booklet, together with the English translation of the poem.

Caption →
Four stills from the animated video by Sreya Lizbeth interpreting the Malayalam poem "Mango" by Vyloppilli Sreedhara Menon. Moving Poetry assignment, Graphic Design 1, OCAD University, Fall 2024. (Image used with permission)

BEYOND THE WRITTEN WORD

In graphic design, we tend to emphasize the written language with little attention to the spoken language. As someone who grew up speaking another language, I believe there is much we can learn from listening to other unfamiliar (and familiar) languages.

In the movie, students are tasked with using kinetic typography to express key concepts, words, or lines in the poem, instead of its full English translation. The idea is to engage viewers in listening to the poem in its original language, even if that is English. Removing captions helps people pay attention to the prosody of the poem and how it is expressed visually, rather than focusing on reading, and potentially missing on everything else. The English translation of the poem is reproduced in the booklet together with its original.

The strategy to remove captions was inspired by a technique by acclaimed American film editor Walter Murch (2001). In his approach to editing, Murch advocates for isolating sensory channels to sharpen attention to each perceptual mode individually. For example, removing sound when editing images and vice versa.

Applied to the Moving Poetry project, withholding English subtitles in the movie redirects viewers' attention from the reflexive act of reading toward the sonic and visual dimensions of the work. Without the crutch of translation, audiences must attune themselves to the rhythm, intonation, and emotional cadence of unfamiliar languages, while simultaneously interpreting the visual narrative. This constraint transforms the viewing experience from passive consumption to active listening and seeing.

The strategy, however, brings discomfort to students who fear viewers might not engage with their work due to unfamiliarity with their language. I acknowledge their concerns, while reminding them that meaning operates on multiple levels—visual, sonic, emotional, and narrative. Furthermore, sharing their culture through their own language validates their linguistic identity as worthy of aesthetic attention. For example, Ruslana Makarova, who selected the Ukrainian poem "Contra Spem Spero" by Lesya Ukrainka, was concerned that viewers of her movie would miss out the powerful message in the poem. While her movie includes more text than initially anticipated, the result is a strong visual–sonic experience that honors both the poem's message and its Ukrainian voice. The poem is read by her sister Lyudmila Makarova.

Caption →

Four stills from the animated video by Ruslana Makarova interpreting the Ukrainian poem "Contra Spem Spero" by Lesya Ukrainka. Moving Poetry assignment, Graphic Design 1, OCAD University, Fall 2024. (Image used with permission)

By prioritizing the poem's original language and inviting audiences into an experience of beautiful unfamiliarity, the project challenges the notion that English should be the baseline for engagement with visual communication. For viewers encountering unfamiliar languages, the experience has the potential to build empathy and expand their understanding of how design communicates.

The booklet component of the project complements the movie by presenting the poem, the interview, and other details. It extends the cultural experience to the print realm by engaging readers with the written word. Students are encouraged to reproduce the poem in the original script next to its English translation. Some students also include a bilingual presentation of their conversation with the poem reader. The bilingual design challenges they face are explored more fully by Diane in the next section, Multilingualism.

Caption ↖
Four-fold accordion booklet by Sreya Lizbeth presenting the Malayalam poem "Mango" by Vyloppilli Sreedhara Menon in both its original script and English translation. Moving Poetry assignment, Graphic Design 1, OCAD University, Fall 2024. (Image used with permission)

Caption ↑
Four-fold accordion booklet by Ruslana Makarova presenting the Ukrainian poem "Contra Spem Spero" by Lesya Ukrainka in both its original script and English translation. Moving Poetry assignment, Graphic Design 1, OCAD University, Fall 2024. (Image used with permission)

STUDENT LEARNING AND PEDAGOGICAL CHALLENGES

In practice, students consistently discover that their peers engage deeply with their work, responding with curiosity and appreciation. Class critiques incorporate conversations about sounds and diverse scripts in addition to other usual design details.

The assignment helped students design through multiple channels simultaneously: tone of voice, pacing, spatial composition, and kinetic movement rather than relying solely on semantic understanding. This can be invaluable in an increasingly globalized design profession where practitioners regularly work across languages and cultures, especially in places like Toronto, where we are located.

Perhaps most significantly, the collective viewing experience revealed that not understanding every spoken word didn't preclude meaningful engagement with the work. On the contrary, the linguistic and cultural context of each student's project enriched our shared learning, deepening our understanding of design as a pluralistic and multilayered form of communication.

Multilingualism

The enriching multicultural milieu paves the way to instil the learning and exploration of multilingual typography in the Graphic Design program. In this section, Diane Mikhael outlines pedagogical and strategic approaches that engage students in bilingual and multilingual typography schemes in first year typography course, third year advanced elective course on Type Design, and in extracurricular activities. She employs multiscript typography as a medium to express students' visible language, encouraging them to interrogate power structures by linking typographic form to their dynamic, complex, and articulated identities.

The principles shaping the bilingual visibility of form and meaning in these typographic projects are grounded in theoretical and practical approaches to bilingualism. Suzanne Romaine's *Bilingualism* (1989, pp. 76–109) frames bilingualism not only as a social phenomenon but also as a cognitive and psycholinguistic process, examining how two languages coexist, interact, and are organized within the individual mind.

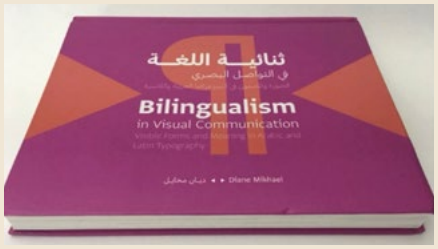
Her discussion of bilingual behaviours such as code-switching and language mixing highlights the dynamic interaction of multiple linguistic systems. In a design context, this suggests that bilingual typographic composition can reflect the simultaneous negotiation of two linguistic structures, with meaning emerging through their visual and spatial interaction. Romaine's seminal concepts inspired Diane Mikhael's *Bilingualism in Visual Communication* (2017, pp. 151–157), in which she proposes three bilingual typographic models that shape typographic practice.

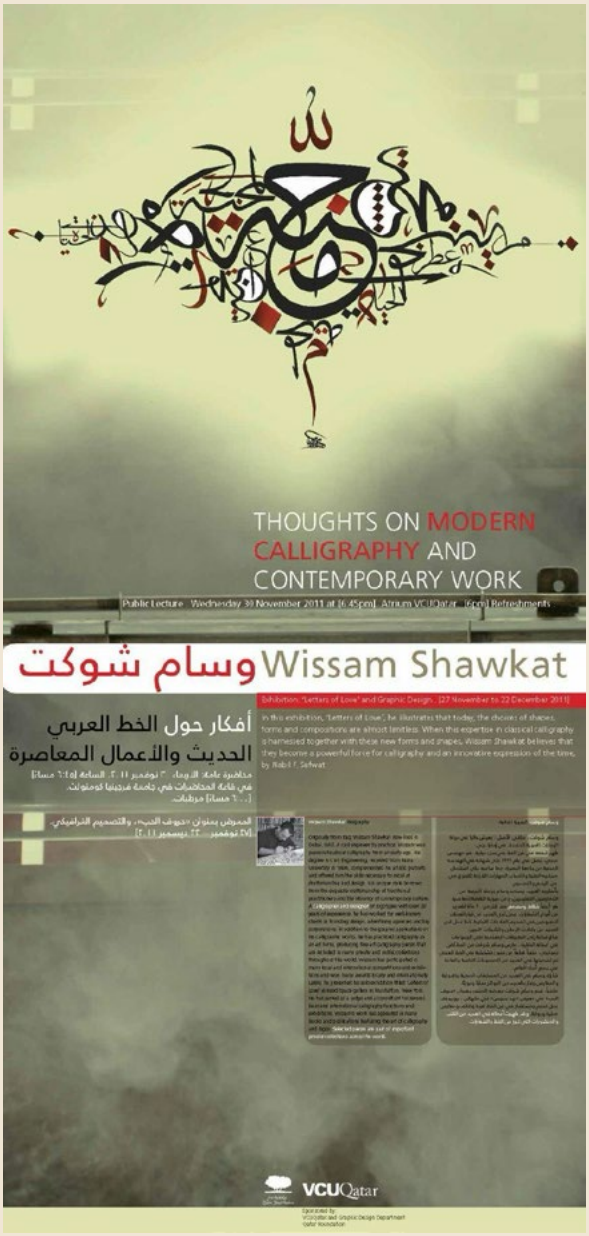
One is the Typographic Equilibrium Model, in which two or more scripts interact and compete visually and semantically on the same surface while communicating comparable content and linguistic value. Another is the Ascending Typography Model, where information presented in one language and script takes visual precedence over others. The third is the Typographic Code-switching Model, which blends words from multiple scripts within a single text to create meaning. Together, these models support the use of multiple scripts in design projects such as publications, posters, and printed matter. Below are examples of Bilingual work designed by Diane Mikhael and which illustrate the three typographic models.

Caption ↘

Book Publication titled Bilingualism in visual communication, Visible forms and meaning in Arabic and Latin typography, written by Diane Mikhael, (2017). The book concept and templates designed by Diane Mikhael, the book cover designed by Roula El Khoury Saliba, and the design direction by Marianne Sahouri.

Arabic and Latin scripts coexist on the same spread with equal weight in both form and meaning. In this bilingual text, the Arabic and English content follow a Typographic Equilibrium Model, where both languages are presented with equal importance and visual balance.





← Caption

Poster design titled “Thoughts on Modern Calligraphy and Contemporary Work” designed by Diane Mikhael, (2011). This bilingual poster promotes a lecture and exhibition by renowned calligrapher Wissam Shawkat at Virginia Commonwealth University in Qatar.
In the design, the Arabic typography is more visually dominant compared to the English. The expressive Arabic calligraphy is amplified and appears “louder,” exemplifying the Typographic Ascending Model, where the hierarchy and emphasis of type visually guide the viewer’s attention from the dominant to the subordinate text.

↓ Caption

A tote bag designed by Diane Mikhael, (2025). This bilingual tote bag presents a hybrid message combining two scripts—Lebanese Arabic and French. The sentence blends words from each script within a single textual structure to convey one unified meaning, exemplifying the Typographic Code-Switching Model.

Applying these approaches and developing new strategies for multilingual design in education can significantly reshape designers' awareness of multicultural audiences and challenge simplified, binary views of people and their cultural contexts.

By demystifying how bilingual individuals think and communicate, Diane equips students with the tools to thoughtfully engage bilingual audiences through their typographic designs.

MULTISCRIPT LETTERFORMS

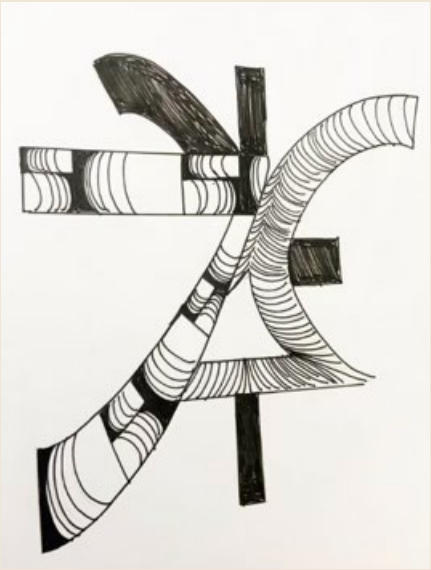
Diane encourages the use of various languages and scripts to expand knowledge and resources of other cultures. This results in a more inclusive and respectful knowledge-based learning experience for all, including educators.

In response to this strategy, she organized a three-hour multiscript typography workshop for first-year Graphic Design students enrolled in the Type 1 course at OCAD University. The workshop was developed in collaboration with guest speaker Dr. Huda Smitshuijzen AbiFarès, guest curator of Inner Structures – Outer Rhythms at the Aga Khan Museum and Founding Director of the Khatt Foundation in Amsterdam. Drawing on her expertise as a researcher, author, designer, educator, and cultural advocate, Dr. Smitshuijzen AbiFarès introduced students to the visual, historical, and cultural dimensions of multiscript typography. She subsequently directed students to the online resource Decodeunicode: The World's Writing Systems, where they were asked to select one Latin character and one non-Latin character from different writing systems (A significant number of students selected and used their mother tongue script).

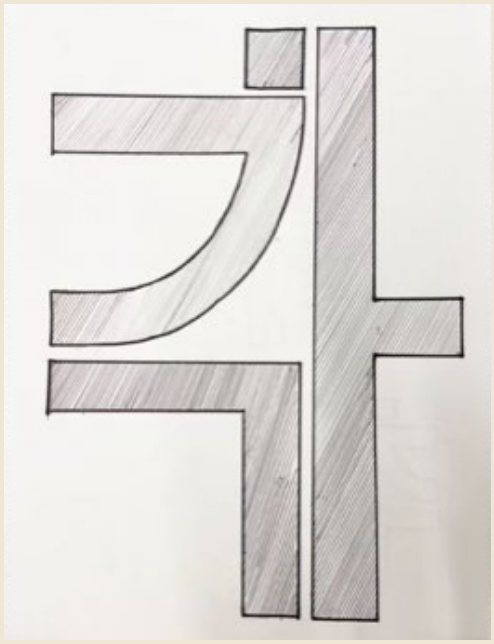
Students were then instructed to print each selected character at a large scale on A4 paper and to produce a hand-drawn multiscript typographic composition. Using the two characters, students explored formal contrasts and relationships between scripts in order to emphasize the distinctive qualities of each letterform while creating a cohesive and abstract visual composition. Script pairings included, for example, Greek/Coptic with Hangul, Latin with Samaritan, and Latin with Tibetan.

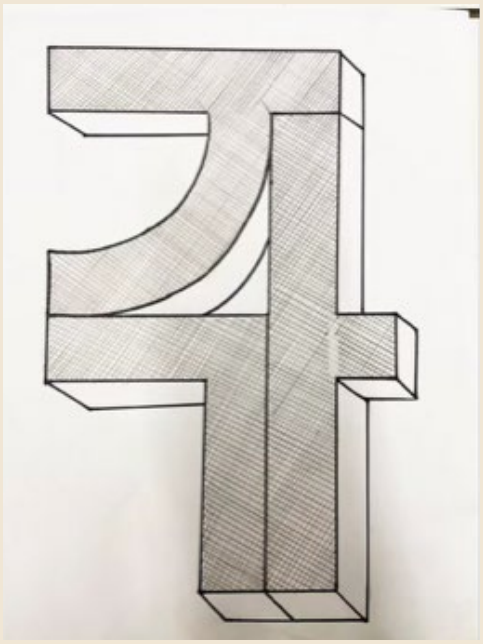
Students' approaches ranged from maintaining a balance between two distinct scripts to deliberately privileging one over the other. Moving beyond the critical observation of letterform formal qualities, the workshop facilitated a visual dialogue between cultures.
In alignment with course objectives and learning outcomes centred on the examination of Latin type anatomy, the multiscript workshop cultivates pluriversal approaches to typography.

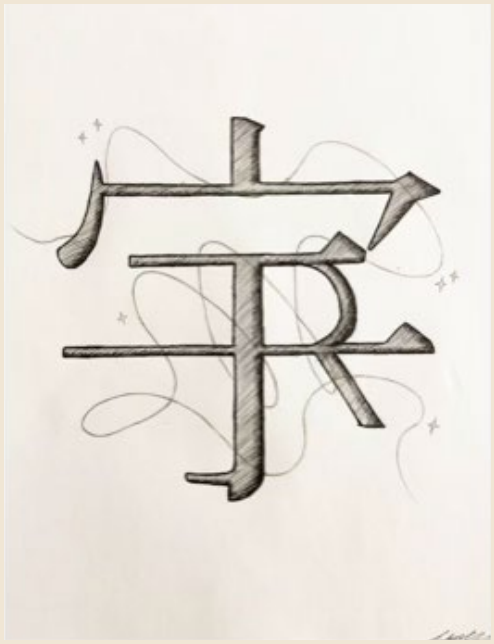
It encouraged monolingual and multilingual students to engage with visual language, symbolism, and typographic expression through scripts connected to their own cultural backgrounds, while also fostering appreciation for unfamiliar writing systems. This pedagogical framework cultivates openness, cultural awareness, and respect, reinforcing the role of typography as a medium for cross-cultural understanding.



Caption ↑
Biscriptual Compositions designed by students (left to right): Yunji Chang (Greek/ Coptic and Hangul), Ben McGowan Bartram (Latin and Samaritan), Owen Hunt (Tibetan and Latin). Typography 1, Fall 2025, OCAD University. (Images used with permission)







Caption
Biscriptual Compositions designed by students:

↑↑ Eunice Pak (Latin and Hangul presenting different approaches)

↖↖ Theone Damue (Greek/ Coptic and Mandaic)

↖ Felicity Wong (Latin and CJK Compatibility Ideographs).

Typography 1, Fall 2025, OCAD University. (Images used with permission)

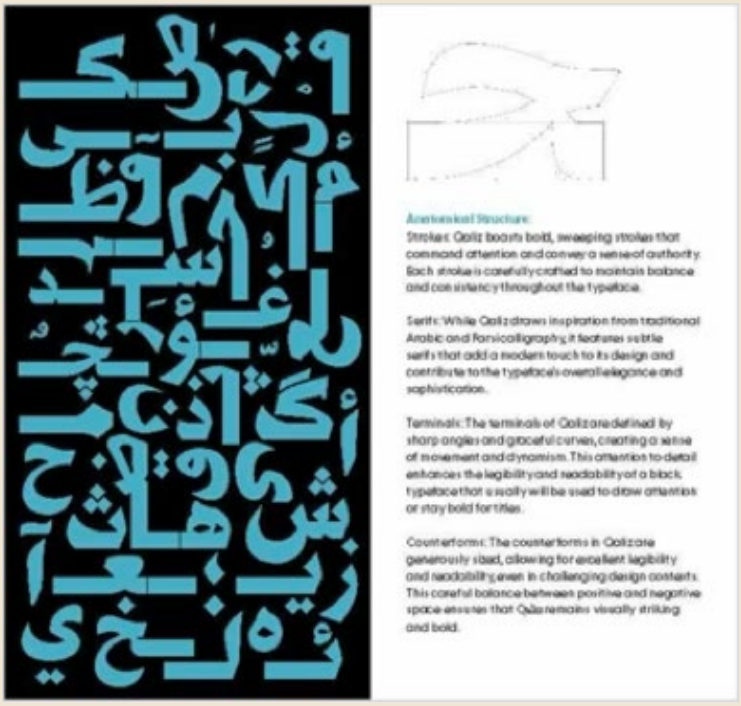
Caption ↑

Multiscript Typography Workshop. Typography 1, Fall 2025, OCAD University. (Images used with permission)

TYPE DESIGN AND MULTILINGUAL PUBLICATIONS

Diane has taught the Typeface Design and Technology course for over three years as a core elective for Graphic Design and Advertising students at OCAD University. The course introduces students to the comprehensive process of designing a complete Latin typeface, encompassing uppercase and lowercase characters, numerals, punctuation, and selected symbols. Students produce either a display or a text typeface as the final outcome. Then, they design a type specimen publication to exhibit the typeface they create. In recent years, however, a growing number of students have expressed interest in developing Arabic or Persian typefaces. While acquiring foundational principles of typeface design and the technical skills necessary for constructing glyphs and letterforms, these students also engage with Arabic calligraphic traditions, stylistic conventions, proportional systems, and structural frameworks. To support this work, Diane provides additional lectures and specialized resources focused on Arabic and Persian type design, and bilingual publications. The course is intentionally structured as a flexible and exploratory framework, allowing monolingual and bilingual students to research and select a writing system of interest, develop a typeface that reflects their linguistic and cultural identity, and produce a type specimen publication.

This pedagogical approach is exemplified by the work of Arian Shariaty, presented below. In his project, Shariaty designed Qaliz, a Persian typeface, along with a corresponding type specimen book. A spread from the publication demonstrates how the conceptual narrative and the language of instructions are articulated in English through instrumental typography, while the Persian script Qaliz is employed for the visual narrative and expressive typographic exploration of the letterforms. The type specimen publication integrates two languages and two distinct writing systems, foregrounding the interplay between dominant English linguistic content and Persian typographic expression. Together, these elements exemplify the Typographic Ascending Model discussed earlier.



Caption →
Qaliz Type Specimen publication, Designed by Arian Shariaty (2024).

Typeface Design Project, Typeface Design and Technology course, Fall 2024, OCAD University. (Image used with permission)

Diane fosters inclusivity by providing open research frameworks that encourage students to explore typography through the script and writing system of their own languages. This pedagogical approach deepens discussions around pluriversality in typography during class critiques and allows students to learn from one another in an environment grounded in respect and openness.

It was eye-opening to see how strongly students engaged with expressing and affirming their identity through type design. The project allowed them to explore a sense of belonging to their ethnic roots, strengthen their connection to a heritage language within the diaspora, research the historical background of the native script, and develop a contemporary typeface that preserves and reinterprets the language's visual identity. Despite limited time and course resources, the students produced impressive and thoughtful work.

Student Arian Shariaty extended his enthusiasm for Persian typography beyond the classroom and formal teaching–learning praxis. He independently initiated a series of activist bilingual posters in support of the *Woman, Life, Freedom* movement, opposing the current regime in Iran. Using his customised bold Persian typeface, his work amplifies the collective voice of the Iranian people. The typography is informed by heavy-weight display fonts such as Kafa, Arabic Revival, and Fatima, as well as by Iran's rich typographic heritage and calligraphic traditions, particularly *Shekasteh*.

Caption →
A Series of Posters designed by Arian Shariaty promoting the campaign Woman Life Freedom (2024). This campaign poster presents the message "Woman, Life, Freedom" in Persian, with the same phrase appearing in small English type in the top-left corner. The designer's goal was to amplify women's rights in Iran. The poster falls under the Typographic Ascending Model, as the hierarchy and scale guide the viewer's attention from the dominant Persian text to the supporting English translation. (Image used with permission)

As part of their extracurricular activities, Graphic Design students Chloe Bowes, Daniel Wang, and Olivia Wideman designed the poster for the Type 1 and Type 2 end-of-year show using Korean, Arabic, and English scripts. While the poster initially appears to align with the Typographic Equilibrium model, as the three scripts in the title are visually well balanced, the supporting text necessary to complete the poster's meaning is written exclusively in English. This gives English greater communicative dominance, thereby reclassifying the poster under the Typographic Ascending Model.

Caption →

A trilingual poster designed by students Chloe Bowes, Daniel Wang, and Olivia Wideman (2024), promoting the end of year show Type Hub Poster, OCAD Univesrity. (Image used with permission)

Moving forward

This paper has explored pedagogical approaches to create space for multiple voices in graphic design education by engaging the pluriversality of cultures present in our classrooms at OCAD University. While we initially developed our assignments independently, we discovered shared core values and strategies, particularly around decentering English and the Roman alphabet and encouraging students to include the languages of their heritage or choice in their design work. Our experiences showed that having both monolingual and multilingual students raises overall awareness of cultural and linguistic diversity.

This prompted us to collaborate in advancing decolonial pedagogical strategies. We plan to examine the limitations of our current approaches while devising new curricular activities. Our goal is to combine our expertise in multilingual and multicultural design into new learning experiences grounded in our local contexts. As design educators, we aim to actively engage students in our courses regardless of their linguistic backgrounds in meaningful multicultural experiences. Such approaches are essential to preparing students to become global citizens, agents of change, and critical typographers and designers capable of working across cultures and languages.

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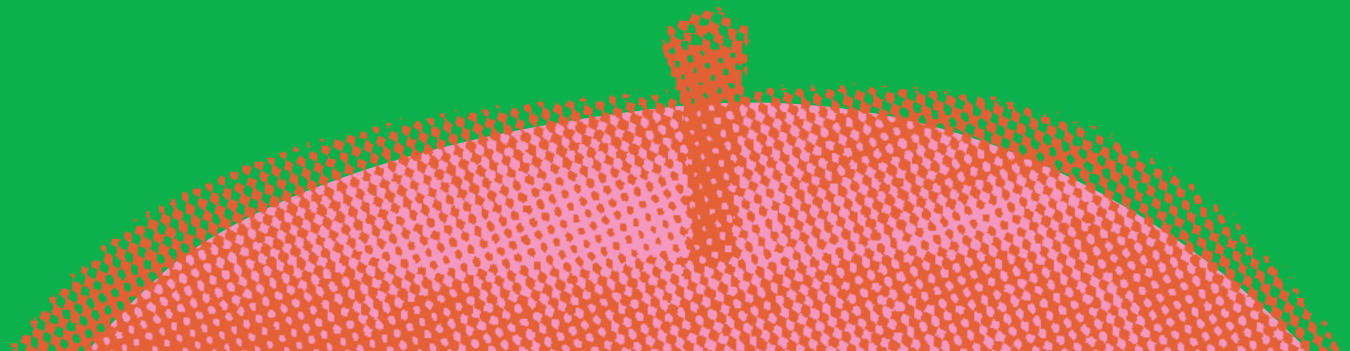
Making,
Language and
Typography
MAKING, LANGUAGE AND TYPOGRAPHY •
02

Typography and making are not simply foundational skills, but rather sites where culture, language, and identity take form, and where students can discover new ways of thinking through design. In the context of ShiftShaping, attention to language and typographic practice becomes a way of expanding what design education recognizes as legitimate knowledge: what students bring, what histories are centered, and what forms of expertise are valued.

These contributions move between pedagogy, experimentation, and curriculum: from rethinking how students learn through what they already know, to exploring letterform transformation across languages, to articulating the place of type design fundamentals within graphic design programs. Together, they frame typography as both method and meaning—a material practice that can cultivate sensitivity to nuance, translation, and plurality. Rather than treating type as neutral, the authors demonstrate how letterforms and scripts become a powerful lens for teaching design in a multilingual, multicultural world.



Genre First:

Rethinking design pedagogy through what students already know

WAYNE A. WILLIAMS
BDES MA

LINK TO TALK ↗

ABSTRACT

This paper presents genre theory as a studio-based pedagogical scaffold and design methodology for visual communication design education. Drawing on a two-year pilot in introductory typography (2023–2025), it translates genre constructs into repeatable studio routines that move students from recognition to production to strategic deviation. The method begins with structured precedent analysis: students build a small corpus of credible exemplars, extract conventions and constraints, and define boundary conditions that shape genre recognition and audience uptake. These research outputs become a working brief for ideation, critique, and revision. The paper illustrates the approach through a book cover (dust jacket) project, using SFL register variables (Field, Tenor, Mode) to connect semiotic and rhetorical analysis to concrete typographic and compositional decisions. Implications are discussed for critique, assessment alignment, and transfer across design genres.

KEYWORDS

Genre theory
Design pedagogy
Critique
Design methods
Scaffolding

AUTHOR BIO

Wayne Williams is an Associate Professor in the Design Program at MacEwan University, a recipient of MacEwan's Distinguished Teaching Award, and a neuro-diverse designer and educator with over 20 years of experience in design education, curriculum development, and inclusive pedagogy. His research focuses on design theory and pedagogy, knowledge visualization, communities of practice, and community-engaged scholarship. He applies design thinking to non-traditional problems and bridges academic and practice-based contexts, emphasizing community-focused, visually grounded methods for addressing social issues.

Why Genre Matters in Visual Communication Design

Design education asks students to do two things at once: communicate clearly and make original work. In visual communication design, that balancing act happens through choices about typography, form, image, and layout that shape how an audience understands a designed artifact in a particular situation. As Jorge Frascara argues, design education should develop students' capacity to think, judge, gather and organize information, and produce communication that is effective and sensitive to users, content, and context (Frascara, 2022, p. 284).

A persistent challenge is helping students understand why a design succeeds in one context and fails in another. Novice designers often sense that "something feels off," but they struggle to name the conventions that guide interpretation, or to explain how their choices anticipate audience/user expectations. I use genre as a practical framework for making those conventions visible and teachable. Here, I treat genre as a recurring social situation (Miller, 1984, 2015) that produces recognizable forms, along with the expectations that make those forms legible to audiences (Bateman, 2011). Genre theory, alongside multimodality, helps explain how communication works across media and why certain design patterns become stable and repeatable (Miller, 2015; Kress, 2009; Schriver, 1997; Spinuzzi, 2003).

Genre is especially useful in design pedagogy because students already have genre literacy. Before they enter a design program, they have learned to recognize genre cues in music, film, television, social media, and everyday writing. They understand how conventions signal purpose, tone, and audience. I build on this prior knowledge to help students transfer intuitive genre recognition into deliberate design judgment, shifting from "I like it" to it works because it matches, or strategically bends, the expectations of this audience in this context (Artemeva & Fox, 2010).

In practice, this approach facilitates the demystification of design genres such as editorial layouts, advertising, branding, and interface screens by treating them as flexible frameworks rather than fixed formulas. Students learn to analyze exemplar sets, identify patterns and constraints, and then innovate within those constraints while maintaining legibility and rhetorical fit.

Genre Theory as a Pedagogical Framework for Scaffolding Design Learning

In an introductory typography course, my main curricular challenge is not choosing topics. It is sequencing interdependent competencies so students can coordinate meaning, form, and production into purposeful outcomes. Students need rhetorical control (Almeida, 2009, p. 196), meaning they can interpret content and develop a concept so typographic choices are motivated rather than simply decorative. They also need craft control, including type selection, spacing, hierarchy, readability, and the organization of paragraphs and columns. Those decisions scale up into systems such as grids, pacing, and consistency across multi-part artifacts, and they must be taught alongside production realities like software workflows, file management, and press-ready output. My task is to align outcomes, assignments, studio activities, and assessment criteria so these competencies develop together rather than as isolated skills.

Critique is central to that alignment because it is a recurring studio practice where tacit judgment becomes visible, discussable, and actionable. In studio work, students rarely solve "meaning," "typography," "layout," and "production" separately. They negotiate these constraints simultaneously within a single artifact. For that reason, I rely on situated examples that make context explicit, not only what a design move is, but why it is appropriate for a particular audience, purpose, and mode of circulation.

Genre theory establishes a coherent framework at both the curricular and instructional levels. As a planning lens, it helps coordinate lectures, exercises, project sequences, critique prompts, and rubrics by treating design outcomes as typified social actions shaped by conventions, constraints, and expectations. As a learning scaffold, it gives students a repeatable way to connect concept, form, and production into design judgment. Instead of teaching kerning, hierarchy, grids, or information displays as discrete topics, I teach them as resources whose value depends on the communicative situation (Frascara & Noël, 2012; Frascara, 2022). Students learn to define what kind of artifact they are making, for whom, in what context, and with what expectations, and then use those answers to guide decisions.

I begin with recognition before production. Students analyze sets of real examples to identify conventions and credibility cues, then apply their findings through guided exercises and integrated projects. Over time, "rules" become genre-calibrated expectations: choices about image, colour, spacing, alignment, density, and type pairing are framed as responses to reading conditions and user needs that differ across artifacts. This produces a curriculum where each competency is taught as a purposeful move within an identifiable genre, and students build transferable genre awareness for new formats and professional contexts.

Perspectives on Genre Theory and Communication

I use genre theory as a practical way to link design form to the social situations that make particular artifacts recognizable and usable. Across genre traditions, the shared claim is that recurring communicative problems produce recurring solutions, and those solutions carry expectations that shape how audiences interpret and act on what they see. This is why genre theory is relevant to design education: it provides a teachable bridge between conventions and context, and it gives critique a shared basis beyond personal taste.

I draw on three complementary strands. From English for Specific Purposes (ESP), I take the idea that genres have describable conventions that can be taught explicitly through model analysis and "moves" that recur across examples (Swales, 1990; Hyland, 2004). From Rhetorical Genre Studies, I take genre as "typified social action," which keeps my focus on what an artifact is trying to accomplish for an audience in a particular situation, not only what it looks like (Miller, 1984). From Systemic Functional Linguistics, I take a language-and-design compatible account of meaning-making in context, including register variables (Field, Tenor, Mode) that help students connect content, stance, and medium to concrete design decisions (Halliday, 1978; Martin & Rose, 2008). I also rely on a teaching sequence that moves from precedent analysis to guided practice to independent production, while treating conventions as flexible resources rather than fixed templates (Gebhard & Harman, 2011).

Applied to visual communication design, this perspective reframes design genres as typified solutions that support audience recognition and uptake while remaining contingent and revisable as platforms, tools, and institutional pressures change. My goal is not to import language pedagogy into studio uncritically, but to translate its most useful constructs into a repeatable studio method for recognition, production, critique, and strategic deviation.

Genre as a Pedagogical Framework and Studio Method

Design education oscillates between craft and concept, aesthetics and communication, and professional readiness and intellectual formation. Across these debates, a recurring concern is pedagogical structure: students need explicit frameworks that make design knowledge visible, transferable, and assessable without reducing studio work to fixed recipes. I use genre theory to provide that scaffolding by turning recurring communicative situations into teachable objects of analysis and practice.

When studio expectations remain tacit, students default to imitation and taste-based judgment rather than developing operational tools for reasoning about meaning in communication (Frascara, 2007). Frascara and Noël (2012) extend this critique to curriculum coherence and evaluation, emphasizing that form is consequential because it shapes decoding in real reading situations, and that programs need disciplined ways to define audiences, contexts, and criteria for success. Cezzar (2019) makes a parallel case under contemporary conditions, arguing for curricula built from durable capacities and for assessment systems that make communicative competence explicit through outcomes and rubrics rather than leaving it to informal critique norms.

I treat genre-informed pedagogy as a practical response to these calls. Genre provides shared questions that anchor both teaching and critique: What situation is this artifact responding to? Who is the audience, and what do they expect? What conventions signal credibility and usability here? How should success be evaluated in the context where the artifact will be encountered? Framed this

As students gain experience, they shift from imitating conventions to controlling them deliberately and adapting them to new contexts.

way, conventions become resources whose value depends on context, and critique shifts from preference to uptake, meaning what the design enables audiences to do and understand in a specific situation.

Curry (2014) argues that studio teaching often suffers from a developmental mismatch: instructors teach from expert practice, while novices lack the domain knowledge and procedural experience to work at that level. He challenges the assumption that methodology "codifies" design in a way that limits creativity. Instead, he frames methodology as a teaching strategy that makes complex activity learnable by reducing cognitive load and supporting schema-building through structured phases and deliberate practice. In this sense, methodology operates as cognitive scaffolding, helping students move from declarative knowledge (knowing concepts) to procedural and strategic knowledge (using concepts effectively in context).

I position genre theory as a design methodology in the pedagogical sense, aligning with Curry's (2014) call for design methodology as teaching strategies. Genre gives novices a repeatable procedure for navigating recurring communication problems: analyze exemplar sets, identify conventions and constraints, translate those patterns into design decisions, and evaluate outcomes against audience expectations rather than tutor taste. As students gain experience, they shift from imitating conventions to controlling them deliberately and adapting them to new contexts. This progression is central to my scaffold: recognition comes first, production follows, and strategic deviation becomes possible once students can justify choices in relation to purpose, audience, and situation. In the next section, I describe this scaffold as a studio cycle organized around recognition, production, and strategic deviation.

Scaffolding Learning with Genre Theory

I use genre as a learning scaffold to help students develop contextual judgment, meaning they can decide what should stay stable in an artifact and what can be questioned or redesigned. In studio, this judgment develops through guided practice that gradually becomes self-directed. Genre supports that progression by giving students a clear way to recognize conventions, understand what those conventions accomplish for audiences, and decide when and how to adapt them.

In my typography studio, I organize learning around a three-stage cycle that repeats across projects:

1. RECOGNITION

Students analyze sets of real exemplars to identify recurring patterns that signal purpose, audience, and credibility. They map conventions in typography, layout, images, symbols, information structure, and production requirements, and connect those conventions to the reading situation where the artifact will be encountered.

2. PRODUCTION

Students create original work within core genre constraints. This phase builds fluency in typographic craft and layout systems while keeping decisions anchored in communicative purpose rather than preference.

3. STRATEGIC DEVIATION

Once students can meet genre expectations reliably, they test purposeful variations that bend or subvert conventions while protecting legibility and rhetorical fit. I frame this as "informed deviation," not disruption for its own sake.

I use critique to move students through the cycle. Critique operates as a recurring studio practice where tacit design judgment becomes explicit and shareable. Students evaluate work using genre-based prompts focused on clarity, credibility, and audience uptake, and they revise by diagnosing mismatches between intended purpose and likely interpretation. This structure helps students shift from imitating a "look" to justifying decisions with evidence from exemplar analysis and context.

Genre also helps me connect semiotics and rhetoric to concrete design problems. Instead of teaching concepts like signification, connotation, or persuasive appeal as abstract terms, I attach them to genre decisions students must explain and refine; what cues signal authority, how typography and graphics establish tone, what visual structures guide reading, and how meaning changes when conventions shift across platforms and audiences.

TABLE 1: GENRE AS A SCAFFOLD FOR DESIGN LEARNING

LEARNING PHASE	GENRE-BASED LEARNING STRATEGY
Early-Stage Recognition	• Identify and analyze genres in existing designs by mapping the visual and structural patterns that define them. • Use genre as an analysis template to deconstruct exemplars and explain how form, function, and meaning align with audience expectations.
Intermediate Stage Reproduction	• Create original work that follows genre conventions to build fluency in using them. • Then apply that genre knowledge in structured critique, identifying how conventions support or constrain creative choices.
Advanced Stage Disruption	• Use genre as a tool for innovation by strategically subverting expectations to create disruptive but effective design solutions. • Once students understand a genre's conventions, they can break them intentionally to produce genre-challenging work that still communicates clearly.

The figure presents a three-stage learning scaffold. In the recognition stage, students analyze exemplar sets to identify recurring patterns and connect them to purpose, audience, and context. In the production stage, students create original work that follows core genre constraints to build typographic and layout fluency. In the strategic deviation stage, students test intentional variations that bend conventions while maintaining legibility and rhetorical fit. Across all stages, critique uses shared criteria focused on clarity, credibility, and audience uptake.

In studio, genre theory becomes a practical methodology for structuring learning, critique, creative exploration, and assessment. It provides:

- A bridge from everyday genre awareness to design practice, extending students' intuitive sense of genre into an understanding of designed artifacts as typified social actions shaped by audience, context, and circulation.
- A repeatable framework for reading design, helping students analyze how conventions, constraints, and expectations produce recognizable forms and guide interpretation and uptake.
- A generative framework for making, where genre operates as informed constraints that support ideation, purposeful variation, and innovation within a recognizable communicative situation.
- A shared vocabulary for critique and assessment, enabling discussion of typographic and compositional choices in terms of appropriateness, credibility, and rhetorical effectiveness rather than preference.
- A coherent way to teach semiotics and rhetoric in context, grounding concepts like signification, connotation, and persuasive appeals in concrete genre examples and in the decisions students must justify and refine.

Embedded at the curriculum level, genre supports a progression from recognition, to competent reproduction, to strategic disruption: students first identify conventions, then learn to control them, and finally learn to redesign or expand them in response to changing contexts and audiences.

Taken together, this scaffolding shows how genre can turn studio ambiguity into learnable progression: students gain stability through recognizable conventions, develop control through practice and criterion–based critique, and eventually earn the ability to innovate through informed deviation. Just as importantly, the scaffold works because it leverages what students already know. Genre does not begin as an abstract theory imported into studio; it begins as everyday competence that can be named, refined, and extended into professional design judgment. The next section examines how instructors can surface this intuitive genre literacy and use it as the foundation for teaching rhetoric, semiotics, and transferable design thinking across projects.

In a two-year pilot (2023–2025), I operationalized genre theory as an instructional method in introductory typography studios. I treated three genre traditions as complementary teaching tools rather than as abstract frameworks, and I used each to shape specific parts of the course. From Systemic Functional Linguistics, I adopted a view of meaning-making as structured and context-dependent, and I translated the teaching-learning cycle into project scaffolding: students study genre exemplars, practice guided analysis and early making, and then move into independent production supported by iterative feedback (Halliday, 1978; Martin & Rose 2008, p. 25). From Rhetorical Genre Studies, I emphasized genre as typified social action and framed design as rhetorical problem solving, so students justify typographic and layout decisions as responses to audience, situation, and likely uptake rather than as stylistic preference (Miller 1984/2015; Freedman & Medway, 1994). From English for Specific Purposes, I treated genres as communicative tools for specific communities and needs, using exemplar sets to reverse-engineer conventions, identify recurring "moves" in information structure and tone, and apply those conventions intentionally in their own work (Swales, 1990; Hyland, 2004).

In the sections that follow, I describe the studio scaffold that resulted, including the recurring cycle of recognition, production, and strategic deviation, and I illustrate it through a book cover project.

Implementing the Genre Scaffold in Studio

I organized instruction as a repeating studio cycle that moves students from recognition to production to reflective refinement. Each cycle begins with a short genre framing lecture that names the communicative situation, audience, and purpose of the artifact. Students then analyze curated exemplar sets using a shared template to surface conventions, constraints, and recurring patterns of meaning-making. Next, they conduct guided genre research to clarify what the genre typically requires and why, and they translate those findings into concept exploration, typographic studies, and compositional trials. The cycle culminates in critique and revision, where students justify decisions in relation to audience expectations

and likely uptake rather than in relation to stylistic preference. Across projects, genre functions as a shared vocabulary for analysis and assessment, making design judgment explicit and teachable.

I established genre as the course's organizing framework in the first studio session through an early recognition exercise. Students discussed familiar genre examples from everyday media and then deconstructed a single artifact (for example, an album cover) using the analysis template. This early exercise introduced the course's core routine: identify what the artifact is trying to do in a particular situation, map the formal conventions that signal that purpose, and articulate how those conventions shape interpretation. I used this routine repeatedly so students could internalize it as a method rather than treat it as a one–off activity.

Genre framing was embedded into every project brief and project launch. Each brief included a short genre framing section that specified

1. social purpose and situation of use,
2. audience and reading practices,
3. constraints, including format, circulation, and production requirements, and
4. conventions students were expected to research and work within.

At the start of each project, I delivered a focused genre lecture tailored to the artifact type and linked conventions to functional rationales such as legibility, credibility, usability, and recognition.

Exemplars served as shared evidence rather than inspiration for imitation. I curated exemplar sets that were broad enough to reveal patterns but controlled enough to limit copying. Sets included strong "center cases" that clearly read as the genre and a small number of edge cases that helped students identify boundaries: what can vary without breaking genre recognition, and what shifts cause an artifact to stop reading as the genre. Students analyzed exemplars using a visual matrix to support pattern recognition, and they were asked to notice stability and variation, credibility and usability cues, and recurring hierarchy and information–structure moves. These analyses became inputs for both making and critique; students referenced exemplar evidence in rationales, peer feedback, and revisions.

In the next section, I illustrate this method through a book cover project, showing how students used exemplar analysis and genre constraints to guide typographic decisions, develop rationale–based justification (McDonnell, 2026 p. 24), and revise through criterion–based critique.

Case Example: Book Cover Design Project

I revised my book cover project to make genre explicit as a bridge between analysis and making. Students design a full dust jacket (front, spine, back) based on a book's content, target audience, and market positioning. I treat the cover as a meaning–making system: students identify the rhetorical problem the cover must solve, study exemplars from the book's genre, and then select and test visual signifiers that signal category, position the reader, and remain functional across production and circulation contexts. To help students connect semiotic and rhetorical analysis to concrete design decisions, I use SFL's register variables, Field, Tenor, and Mode, as a functional decision framework.

I introduce each variable with a one–sentence definition and immediately convert it into design questions students must answer and justify:

FIELD (WHAT THE BOOK IS ABOUT)

What domain cues must be legible at a glance, so the book is correctly recognized and positioned? Students build a "signifier inventory" from exemplar covers, noting recurring image motifs, typographic styles, compositional tropes, and information structures associated with the genre. They then decide which cues to adopt, which to avoid, and which can be varied without breaking recognition. Field anchors the cover's promise: what the book is, and why it matters.

TENOR (WHO IS BEING ADDRESSED, AND HOW)

What relationship does the cover establish between author, reader, and implied community of readers? Students test typographic voice, color, imagery, and layout as stance–making resources. They describe the

tone they intend (for example, authoritative, intimate, playful, unsettling) and support that claim with exemplar evidence and semiotic reasoning, such as how particular cues signal status, accessibility, seriousness, or affect. Tenor anchors audience alignment: who the reader is meant to feel like they are.

MODE (HOW THE COVER IS ENCOUNTERED)

Under what material and platform conditions will the cover be read and used? Students account for dust jacket structure and production constraints while also designing for digital storefront conditions, including thumbnail legibility and scanning behavior. They test what remains readable across scale and what collapses, and they adjust hierarchy and contrast, so key information survives both print handling and screen-based viewing. Mode anchors uptake: what audiences can perceive quickly and what the cover enables them to do.

Students evaluate drafts by checking alignment across the three variables. A cover succeeds when Field, Tenor, and Mode work together: the signifiers coherently communicate the book's domain, the stance fits the intended audience relationship, and the design remains legible and credible across the contexts in which it circulates. In critique, I use these variables as shared criteria so feedback targets specific mismatches, such as a field that signals the wrong genre, a tenor that misaligns with the target reader, or a mode that fails at thumbnail scale.

PROJECT LAUNCH: GENRE LECTURE (BOOK COVERS)

I launch the book cover project with a short genre lecture that makes expectations explicit and turns "good taste" into analyzable criteria. The lecture frames what covers do (signal genre, promise a reading experience, establish credibility, support discovery), where they are read (shelf, thumbnail, catalogue, storefront), and how audiences scan and compare under time pressure. I then foreground constraints that shape form and hierarchy (trim, spine, barcode/pricing, publisher marks, copy structure, thumbnail

legibility) and show how conventions shift across categories and subgenres. Students are asked to research exemplars, identify audience expectations, and produce a short list of "must-solve" design problems for their chosen genre before moving into concept and layout studies.

FROM STRUCTURED INVESTIGATION TO STRUCTURED MAKING

After project launch and exemplar analysis, students conduct visual and genre research as a structured investigation that feeds directly into making. I frame this as structured precedent analysis, not inspiration gathering. Moodboards can be useful later for communicating an overall aesthetic direction, but as an initial step they often drift into style sampling without context, separating visual choices from audience, purpose, constraints, and the conditions under which the work will be read. In contrast, a corpus-based precedent study keeps research accountable to the genre: students examine what credible examples consistently do, why those patterns recur, and where the boundaries of recognition and usability sit.

Students build a small corpus for the chosen genre (typically 25–40 covers) using clear source requirements so the set reflects real practice. They analyze the corpus with a shared template: coding recurring patterns, categorizing constraints, and mapping variation to identify what is stable, what is flexible, and what functions as a boundary case. The research outputs become a working brief for design decisions. Students produce

1. a pattern inventory (layout structures, typographic voice, image strategies, content blocks, hierarchy moves),
2. a constraints list (format, production, platform, time, and market or institutional requirements), and
3. boundary notes (signals likely to break genre recognition or confuse audience uptake).

These artifacts remain live throughout the project and serve as shared evidence in critique and revision, keeping ideation anchored in context rather than taste.

RESEARCH-INFORMED EXPLORATION, RATIONALE BUILDING, AND REVISION

I move students from research to production through a staged sequence that supports rapid variation and accountable decision-making. In a short practice phase, students complete fast, low-stakes exercises that translate findings into visible options: rapid layout studies based on common corpus patterns, typographic voice trials that test tone and stance through typeface, weight, spacing, and scale, hierarchy sketches that rehearse genre-typical reading paths, and modular grid tests that reveal how constraints shape rhythm, density, and legibility. The purpose is comparison. Students generate multiple directions and evaluate them against genre expectations rather than committing early to a single "best" idea.

As students develop concepts, I frame each design move as a rhetorical response and each formal choice as a semiotic act. Students ask: What meanings do these cues activate? What reader position does the design invite? How do typography, image logic, and composition signal credibility, clarity, and usability in this genre? Research functions here as evidence for strategic choices, not as rules to follow.

To make evaluation explicit, students present decisions using a consistent argument structure: Claim (the design decision), Evidence (a pattern, constraint, or boundary insight from research), and Reasoning (why the decision supports purpose, audience expectations, tone, and likely uptake). This structure shifts critique from taste-based reactions to accountable design judgment.

CRITIQUE FOCUSED ON UPTAKE

Once students move into making, the object of analysis becomes student iterations rather than professional exemplars, but the analytic method stays consistent. I structure critique with shared prompts and time-boxed rounds so feedback stays anchored in evidence, purpose, and audience. The central evaluation question is uptake: What genre is this being read as, and what cues are producing that reading?

Across projects, I return to a stable set of prompts: Which genre cues are clear, ambiguous, or conflicting? What expectations are met, bent, or violated? Are deviations strategic and legible, or do they create confusion about purpose, tone, or audience? Where does the design succeed or break down in hierarchy, readability, credibility, and usability? Each critique round produces specific revision targets grounded in exemplar evidence and genre criteria.

REFLECTION AND RE-RATIONALIZATION

To formalize refinement, students document a trace of decision-making from research through iterations. This documentation is not treated as a scrapbook. It functions as evidence that design changes were made in response to constraints, genre expectations, and critique. Students complete a short reflection format (revision memo, process log, or annotated before-and-after) where they identify what changed, why it changed, and how revisions improve likely uptake.

A key assessment requirement is re-rationalization. Students do not only revise the design. They revise the argument for the design using genre, rhetorical, and semiotic language, explaining how signifiers and compositional choices were adjusted to better fit purpose, audience, and context.

ASSESSMENT ALIGNED TO THE GENRE SCAFFOLD

I align assessment with the same concepts used in lectures, research, critique, and revision so evaluation measures context-appropriate judgment rather than stylistic fluency alone. Rubrics are organized into five domains: (1) genre framing (purpose, audience, constraints), (2) research quality (corpus credibility and analytic outputs), (3) appropriateness of decisions (fit between form and context), (4) craft and execution (typographic control, hierarchy, consistency, readability), and (5) production readiness (format specifications and technical accuracy). Students are rewarded for strategic variation when they can name what is being subverted, why, and how the outcome remains legible as the genre. Rationale quality is assessed as a core literacy outcome through the claim–evidence–reasoning structure.

Conclusion and implications for further study

In this paper, I present genre theory as a studio-based pedagogical scaffold and document how I operationalize it in an introductory typography context. My contribution is practical and bounded: I translate genre constructs into repeatable studio routines for exemplar analysis, corpus-based research, criterion-based critique, and rationale-driven revision, and I show how these routines help students connect form, meaning, audience, and context.

This approach also requires clear cautions. Genre pedagogy can slide into formalism if conventions become templates, it can become reproductive if "professional standards" are taught as neutral, and it can lose context if genre is reduced to surface features rather than situated action and uptake (Gebhard & Harman, 2011). In studio terms, these risks show up as imitation without justification, uncritical reinforcement of dominant visual norms, and critique that targets style rather than communicative function. For that reason, I treat convention as a resource for meaning-making rather than a rulebook, and I embed critical genre questions into briefs, critique prompts, and assessment criteria so students learn not only how genres work, but who they work for and what they normalize (Frascara, 2022, p. 285).

Next steps for this work are empirical and programmatic. In future classroom-based inquiry, I will examine:

1. how genre scaffolds are best sequenced across a design curriculum,
2. how genre-based critique affects studio culture and assessment consistency, and
3. how students transfer genre reasoning across media, communities of practice, and professional contexts, including questions of power, ideology, and inclusion in visual norms.

The goal is to refine the scaffold, test its effects, and clarify where genre-based instruction most improves students' capacity for context-appropriate, defensible design judgment.

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Morphing shapes between languages

as if we never knew them

ZHA
LIYANG

LINK TO TALK ↗

ABSTRACT

This article is a recap and extension of what was presented at the 2025 Design Educator Conference Toronto, titled Morphing shapes between languages as if we never knew them. This paper provides some additional background information and in-depth analysis beyond the presented content, to making the research more approachable to designers and design educators working with multi-script typography and type design.

AUTHOR BIO

Liyang Zha is a designer and educator specializing in the intersections of multilingual typography, visual identity, and environmental graphics. He teaches communication design at Emily Carr University of Art + Design in Vancouver. Meanwhile, as the founding principal of "Design," a Vancouver-based studio, he works with a global range of clients, from local boutiques to international corporations.

His practice is driven by research into language and script equity and experimental type design using unconventional technologies and materials. Liyang is committed to applying these academic insights to functional, inclusive design solutions for both digital and physical spaces.

GLOSSARY

Kǎitǐ 楷体

A handwritten style, frequently considered the standard or benchmark for handwriting due to its clear stroke composition and close reflection of writing fluidity. (glossary image 1)

Songti/Mingti 宋体/明体

Derived from Song dynasty wood type, with a mechanical horizontal and vertical stroke fluidity to maintain print legibility. It was first standardized in the Ming dynasty, accounting for the different names used for Simplified Chinese (Song) and Traditional Chinese (Ming). (glossary image 1)

Fǎngsòng 仿宋

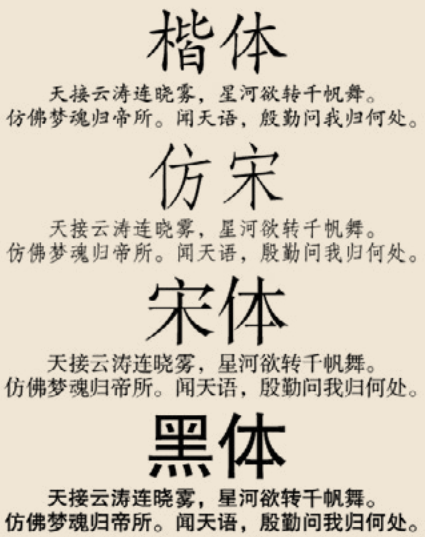
Derived from Song dynasty wood type, with stroke fluidity preserved. It was first standardized in the early 20th century. (glossary image 1)

Hēitǐ 黑体

Translated and developed from the Japanese Goshikku, which itself is a translation of the Latin term Gothic. First appearing in the early 20th century as a display typeface, its strokes exhibit mono-thickness and the style is generally characterized by minimal stroke ornamentation. (glossary image 1)

Glossary Image 1 ↓

Display of Kaiti, Fangsong, Songti, and Heiti.
Typefaces published by 方正字库 Foundertype



Shìjiǎo 饰角

The triangular ornament found at the beginning, turning points, and endpoints of a stroke. It is frequently compared to a Serif and is often treated as the counterpart of serif in Chinese. It is most commonly encountered in Songti, and traces it origin to Dunbi.

Glossary Image 2 ↓

Example of Shijiao with 方正书宋 FZ ShuSong from Foundertypei

Dùnbǐ 顿笔

The calligraphic movement involving a slowing or pausing of the writing tool at the beginning, turning points, and endpoints of a stroke.

Glossary image 3 ↓

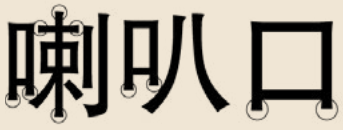
Example of Dunbi with 方正楷体 FZ KaiTi, 方正黑体 FZ HeiTi, 方正仿宋 FZ FangSong, and 方正书宋 FZ ShuSong from Foundertypei

Lǎbākǒu 喇叭口

The flared, trumpet-like shape observed at the beginning or the end of a stroke.

Glossary image 4 ↓

Example of Labakou with 方正黑体 FZ HeiTi from Foundertype



Bǐfēng 笔锋

The tapered termination on certain strokes, indicating a swift lifting motion of the writing instrument.

Glossary image 5 ↓

Example of Bifeng with 方正楷体 FZ KaiTi and 方正仿宋 FZ FangSong from Foundertypei

Serif

The decorative component at the end of a stroke used in scripts. In this document, “Serif” refers exclusively to the component within the Latin script, unless otherwise specified.

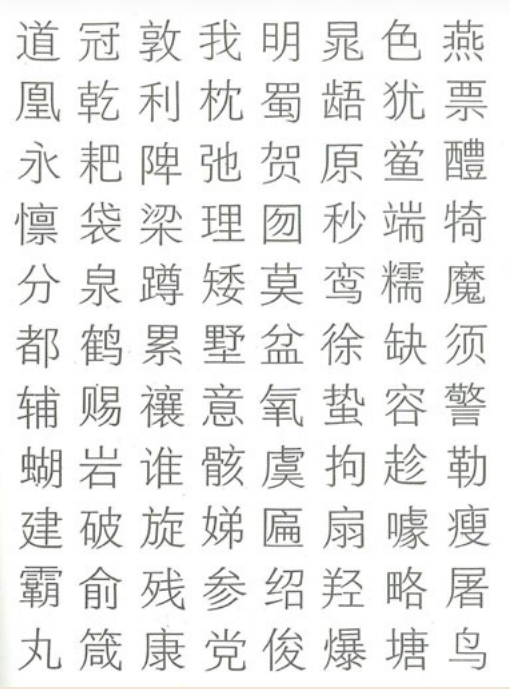
Transitional

The established definition of this term pertains to serif typefaces possessing visual characteristics intermediate between the renascent and modern periods. In this document, “transitional” refers to a typeface exhibiting qualities from multiple conventional type styles, unless otherwise specified.

Introduction

There was a pioneer in Chinese digital typeface design, 徐学成 Xuecheng Xu, who was active from the 1960s to the early 1990s. He has an award-winning digital and metal type specimen, 无饰线体, or "sans serif typeface" in translation, which, according to him, was designed based on the traditional Songti, with inspiration from the "popularity of modern sans serif typefaces in foreign design." (image 1). From this specimen with a limited number of glyphs, we can spot what he meant in shape details: straight and mechanical skeletons, representing its fabricated and print-oriented nature; the absence of stroke ornaments 饰角Shìjiǎo, which is often a telltale sign of a Heiti style; but the existence of the contrasted stroke ends of 笔锋Bǐfēng is more characteristic of Songti, or rather more prominent on its handwritten cousin, Fǎngsòng. Unfortunately, there is no digital version of Xu's Sans Serif typeface available. As I am capable of designing typefaces, I decided to do a typeface revival based on Xu's specimen with a small group of designers here in Vancouver. Our iteration, named Pinesong Sans, had the initial release of its Latin segment in 2025. I would like to present the process, outcome, and learning derived from this project with this piece of writing.

Image 1 ↓



Understanding typeface classification

Prior to discussing the process of this type revival, attention should be drawn back to Xu's observation: that this endeavor sought to create a "sans serif" typeface based on the Latin script. While sans serif is frequently compared with Heiti and is often considered its equivalent in Latin–Chinese multiscriptural design, Xu's undertaking revealed a fundamental divergence in the understanding of the "sans serif" concept across different languages and scripts. Although the lineage of Heiti can be traced to the Latin sans serif via Japanese Goshikku (Deng et al., 2020), through the evolution of design and the inherent structure of Chinese characters, many Heiti typefaces incorporate Dunbi and Labakou to better accommodate and reflect on the established writing conventions of characters (image 2). Therefore, the immediate defining characteristic of a Heiti is often understood as the uniformity of its stroke thickness, rather than whether any decorative elements are incorporated in the typeface.

Image 2 ↓

思源黑体是一款带有顿笔元素的黑体
Source Han Sans,
a Heiti incorporates Dunbi

华文黑体是一款带有喇叭口元素的黑体
Huawen Heiti,
a Heiti incorporates Labakou

To comprehend the significance of Xu's typeface, a reexamination of the development, visual representation, and conventional understanding of foundational Chinese type classification is necessary. A clear functional rationale underpins the original reference for both Songti and Fangsong. While both styles originate from the same historical period, the original Songti utilized a horizontal–vertical structure with pronounced contrast to maintain character legibility given the constraints of lower–quality wood blocks, frequently movable types, upon which it was engraved, resulting in its distinctly mechanical aesthetic. Conversely, Fangsong was developed for block printing employing superior quality wood. This higher–grade material enabled engravers to retain the handwritten quality of Kaiti, thereby preserving the fluid and organic nature of the strokes. Thus, one can comfortably establish the homogeneous Kaiti origin of Songti and Fangsong and posit that, as a type style, Songti is optimized for mechanical printing, whereas Fangsong is capable of preserving calligraphic fluidity; therefore, it can be asserted that this visual disparity is fundamentally supported by considerations of materiality and functionality. In contrast, the structural convergence of Heiti and Songti derives from Songti, as Heiti was developed based on Songti, rather than the Kaiti from which both Songti and Fangsong emerged. This presents an intriguing scenario: although Heiti is derived from Songti, it technically 'grew' organically from a technical adaptation of a handwritten style, contradicting the suggestion of its Latin correspondent, "sans serif".

Therefore, Xu's Sans Serif typeface warrants particular interest, as it appears to be a subtraction of the Shijiao from Songti rather than a mere rearrangement of monolinear strokes. However, the subtle contrast between horizontal and vertical strokes, coupled with certain elongated ending strokes, suggests a closer alignment with the Fangsong style. Furthermore, a distinct characteristic separating Xu's Sans Serif design from a conventional Heiti typeface is the presence of Bifeng at the terminus of inclining strokes and components, which brings the stroke contrast that is entirely absent in Heiti.

Returning to the original inspiration behind Xu's Sans Serif typeface—modern sans serif foreign typefaces—we encountered a central point of multiscript type discussion: the definition of a serif and the implications of its removal from a glyph. In developing a new typeface, this critical question became how to reintroduce the concept of sans serif back into the Latin glyph set, as the Latin script remains an essential component of nearly all contemporary non-Latin typefaces.

The endeavor to revitalize a transitional typeface such as Xu's work necessitates this inquiry. Historically, Latin sans serif creation has followed two paths: constructing the notional skeleton with monolinear tools or removing serifs from an existing serif form (Tam, 2002). Nevertheless, as previously noted, the sans-serif characteristics of Heiti were almost entirely derived from the monolinear tool pathway, and Xu's execution of sans serif unequivocally employed the latter method. However, the subtraction of Shijiao from the Songti base inadvertently concentrated visual tension toward the Bifeng, thereby aligning the typeface with the Fangsong style through its emphasis on handwritten characteristics. Consequently, this singular act of Shijiao removal resulted in a hybrid comparable to "removing serifs from a typeface while simultaneously incorporating italic features to render it sans serif." Ironically, this seemingly nonsensical description illuminates a path forward: the required Latin counterpart for this type revival must possess a mechanical skeleton, minimal ornamentation, and capture the handwritten quality through an element of fluidity.

Processing the Understanding

When a convergence feature is identified across two distinct scripts, the question arises whether this feature functions identically in both.

Regrettably, this is frequently not the case in multiscript design. A readily apparent illustration is the fundamentally divergent concept of “monospace” between the Latin and Chinese scripts. Although Chinese is inherently considered a monospaced script, its preferred Hao system for typesetting incorporates vertical measurement and alignment in its functionality (Biľak, 2025; Deng et al., 2020). Therefore, it necessitates the introduction of supplementary terminology to convey the Chinese definition of monospace to an English monolingual designer. Conversely, it requires specific definitions to thoroughly elucidate the English concept of monospace to a monolingual Chinese designer.

However, what if the scripts of a typeface were developed based on the trace of the same writing tool? A thorough demonstration that this homogenous tool does not always yield convergent expression is provided by the open-source typeface LXGW Wenkai and its variant, LXGW Bright. (image 3).

Image 3 ↓

A quick brown fox jumps over a lazy fox
LXWG Wenkai - Klee One

霞鶩文楷 - クレー

LXWG Bright - Ysabeau Office
A quick brown fox jumps over a lazy fox

The LXGW Wenkai family originated from Klee One, a Japanese typeface that occupies a space between the 楷書体 Kaisho-tai (Regular/Benchmark Script Style) and 教科書体 Kyokasho-tai (Textbook Script Style) (Fontworks Inc., 2020). When the typeface is adapted for Chinese, this transitional quality corresponds readily between the Kaiti and Fangsong styles. As evidenced by the accompanying type specimen, the original LXGW Wenkai incorporated the Latin glyph set from Klee One, which mirrored the shared handwritten aesthetic of its Japanese/Chinese character set through mimicking the writing of the same tool. While this approach successfully maintained visual consistency across scripts, it failed to convey the intended contextual seriousness between them. This discrepancy is rooted in the differing perceptions of softness in handwriting and calligraphy, as the soft brush origins of Chinese calligraphy are not fully aligned with Noordzij’s theory, first published in 1985, which underpins the majority of modern Latin type design theories and practices. Therefore, LXGW Bright employs an alternative pairing strategy to achieve the requisite seriousness: it identifies the transitional quality of the character set and then matches this characteristic with native Latin design concepts. The result is the pairing of LXGW Wenkai with a transitional Latin

typeface, Ysabeau Office, a sans-serif Latin typeface that retains the essence of Garamond (Thalmann & Catharsis Fonts, 2019). Although this pairing sacrifices visual convergence between the scripts, it provides a significantly improved functional and contextual resonance bridge between the two writing systems.

Latinization of a transitional typeface

The re-iteration of the Chinese character sample set is a relatively straightforward task.

Image 4 ↓

事今体国如宋形
影心迅然成我风
日明曰月朝松永

Our objective in the Latinization of this set was to maintain both the contextual and visual continuity between the two scripts. To achieve this, the team developed a transitional map to situate each script within its transitional coordinate between each baseline style.

Image 5 ↓

Following the placement of the Chinese set on the transitional map, we attempted to objectify type descriptions and parameters, subsequently narrowing the selection to a handful of parameters deemed transferable to Latin glyphs.

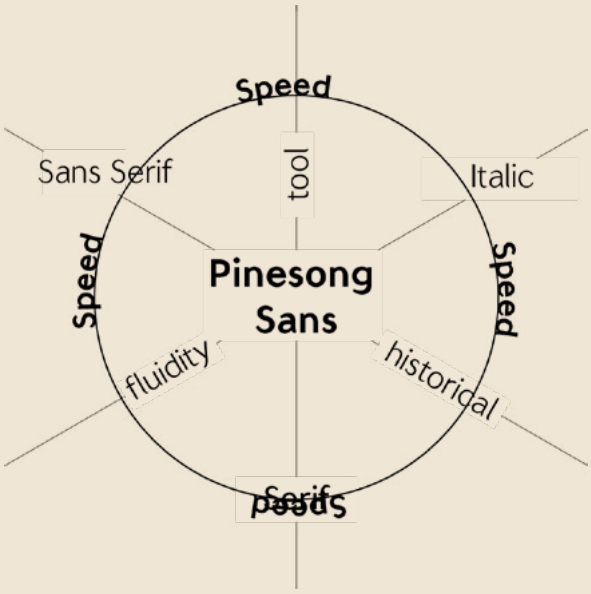
Image 6 ↓

We then sought the native Latin correspondents for the selected parameters and a cross-reference back to the subjective parameters was conducted to ascertain if the contextual quality could be successfully carried over.

Image 7 ↓

We determined that speed could serve as the sole parameter to define the typeface's character. This is also a cross-script property, as both scripts exhibit "tapering" in response to a faster writing speed, albeit a slightly different manifestation of tapering.

Image 8 ↓



The resulting typeface is presented below:

Image 9 ↓

Post project discussions

This project revealed a critical need for unified, cross-language understanding within culturally and linguistically diverse teams, occasionally necessitating the modification of common definitions within a mediator language to achieve the most accurate description. In the context of the Pinesong Sans project, the term “transitional” warrants particular attention. In North America, the location of the project’s conception and presentation, a “transitional typeface” is conventionally understood through Maximillien Vox’s 1954 classification, which refers to a specific group of serif typefaces exhibiting chronological transitional characteristics between Renaissance and Modern letterforms. However, the team discovered that moving beyond the established understanding of the term helps bridge a necessary understanding to describe the transitional quality between visual forms. For other projects, the key question arising is how to communicate a non-Latin typeface, and to some extent, Latin typefaces, that incorporates characters and features from multiple type styles. This inquiry is not intended to dispute the validity of Vox’s theory; rather, it is pursued in light of ATypI’s 2021 decision to de-adapt Vox’s classification, citing its lack of coverage for non-Latin type styles. Considering the ever-diversifying student demographic and design environment within North American graphic and communication design education, what role should type classification assume to meet these evolving needs? The learning outcomes derived from this project indicate that a deviation from established definitions contributes positively to inclusivity within the design process.

Image 10 ↓

Image 11 ↓

Image 12 ↓

Image 13 ↓

Furthermore, this dialogue holds significant relevance for the commercial design industry. An observation concerning type classification during the drafting of this proceeding is that Google Fonts assigned classification tags to Klea One and LXGW Wenkai based solely on their Latin glyph set (image 13). As previously discussed in this proceeding, the native Latin glyph sets from both fonts lack a comprehensive understanding of the gravity and refinement inherent in soft-tipped handwriting; indeed, the same writing tool is even interpreted as a marker, as indicated by one of the multiple tags. To be precise, achieving the quality of Chinese/Japanese handwriting demonstrated in both typefaces necessitates years of dedicated calligraphy practice. However, the subjective and unidimensional approach adopted by Google Fonts may very well result in incongruous design outcomes, particularly when the designer or developer lacks a thorough grasp of the language and script involved in the project. For design educators, the challenge remains: how can we incorporate languages and scripts that we do not fully comprehend into the curriculum, and how can we ensure that students receive accurate information to inform their design process? Personally, I believe broader discussions and dialogues from a diverse group are highly valuable on this topic and represent an essential step towards establishing a more open and inclusive design education environment in North America.

And how would we start the conversation? One discovery made by the Pinesong Sans design team throughout this project is that the unknown can occasionally serve as an excellent initial point. During the project's execution, we observed that a shared, conventional understanding of a concept often outweighs the specialized, professional definition assigned to certain desired term(s). This is because not all team members possess a confident understanding of Chinese type history; therefore, an accessible starting point often correlates with the familiarity of the term rather than the precise understanding of its professional definition. Given that the institutional instruction of multiscript design in North America is still nascent, it may be advantageous to initiate discourse without requiring a rigidly established set of typographical terminologies. This approach is particularly relevant as no universal taxonomic system, analogous to Carolus Linnaeus' binomial nomenclature, has been established across all scripts. And frankly, even the most established classification systems for the Latin script warrant some reconsideration.

Wrap up

The Pinesong Sans revival project serves as a crucial case study in the complexities of multiscript type design and its implications for design education in North America. By re-examining and re-iterating Xu Xuecheng's transitional typeface, the project highlighted how the conventional classification need to be broadened to facilitate cross-cultural design understanding. The necessity of adopting a fluid, context-aware approach to terminology proves essential for fostering inclusivity within diverse design teams and curricula. Ultimately, the lessons learned from Pinesong Sans advocate for a proactive shift in pedagogical and professional dialogues, moving toward a more adaptable, non-hierarchical understanding of type classification that accurately reflects the global reality of contemporary typography. I encouraged this open-ended approach to future designers for the evolving demands of multiscript design.

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Inflection Points:

Type design fundamentals in graphic design curricula

A REFLECTIVE SUMMARY OF PRINCIPLES AND EXERCISES FOR EXPLORATION

CARL SHURA

KEYWORDS

Type Design
Typography
Education
Foundations
Exploration

ABSTRACT

The session introduces fundamentals of type design through both theory and practical exercises that can be integrated into graphic design and typography lessons; the end goal being to empower students to explore typographic composition with more clarity and confidence. From a type designer's perspective, which is still a niche and often inaccessible field of design education, I believe this positioning provides a powerful lens to deepen understanding of the typographic rules and design principles taught across the general graphic design curriculum—often, many of these rules and principles can lack a clear foundation or rationale to describe how and why we apply them. Drawing from Gerrit Noordzij's (2006) contrast theory in *The Stroke*, Frank Blokland's (2016) modular letter model for rhythm and harmony and Sofie Beier's (2022) research on legibility, the workshop highlights critical approaches in type design education. By focusing on the fundamentals of typography (the elemental letterform, then the word, the line, and the page), design principles are revealed in a raw form, offering students new perspectives on form, space, contrast and balance.

AUTHOR BIO

Carl Shura (he/him) is a Canadian visual designer with experience focused in identity, wayfinding, exhibits, and type design. A graduate of the graphic design program at Winnipeg's Red River Polytechnic, he's also completed the post-graduate type design program at The Cooper Union and a summer residency at the SVA TypeLab in New York.

Carl is a member of faculty at the SCHOOLOFDESIGN at George Brown Polytechnic in Toronto where he lectures on design, typography, communication, and print production. He is a member of TDC (the Type Director's Club), RGD (the Association of Registered Graphic Designers), RHSC (the Royal Heraldry Society of Canada), and is the Canadian Delegate for ATypI (Association typographique internationale).

Introduction: Context of the Workshop

This workshop was delivered at the 2025 RGD Design Educators Conference at George Brown College in Toronto, and is adapted from a presentation first delivered at ATypI (Association typographique internationale) Copenhagen in April 2025.

The session introduces fundamentals of type design through both theory and practical exercises that can be integrated into graphic design and typography lessons; the end goal being to empower students to explore typographic composition with more clarity and confidence. From a type designer's perspective, which is still a niche and often inaccessible field of design education, I believe this positioning provides a powerful lens to deepen understanding of the typographic rules and design principles taught across the general graphic design curriculum—often, many of these rules and principles can lack a clear foundation or rationale to describe how and why we apply them. Drawing from Gerrit Noordzij's (2006) contrast theory in *The Stroke*, Frank Blokland's (2016) modular letter model for rhythm and harmony and Sofie Beier's (2021) research on legibility, the workshop highlights critical approaches in type design education. By focusing on the fundamentals of typography (the elemental letterform, then the word, the line, and the page), design principles are revealed in a raw form, offering students new perspectives on form, space, contrast and balance.

Content of the Workshop

Introducing the fundamentals of type design that the workshop focuses on, we are reminded that all design principles can be summarized to their most elemental expression of modifying "form and space." The original presentation for ATypI 2025 featured nine illustrated lessons as a framework for consideration in this conversation around integrating more type design fundamentals into the broader design curricula. These 9 illustrations included:

- the continuum of handwriting, calligraphy, lettering, and typography
- the categorization of writing/strokes vs drawing/shapes, and adaptive vs structured alignments and forms
- the form and the hand: running vs interrupted (motion), and expansion vs translation (strokes)

- the importance of maintaining the stroke
- modularity of forms within the system
- spacing and rhythm (letter space and word space)
- size and spatial frequency (at the levels of the letterform, word, and line spacing)
- readability, and
- legibility

In this revised workshop format, a simplified binary pairing of form and space encapsulates the essential principles to be expressed with further dialectical comparisons within them:

- shaping form: modularity and stroke
- shaping space: uniformity and balance

Principles and Exercises

1. FORM–MODULARITY

Good type design reuses structure/components for harmony across the system.

Discussing the "DNA" of typefaces often focuses on the form as the style of a letterform (serifs, decorative swashes, proportion of x-height to cap height, character widths, and overall weights) rather than a deeper exploration of the stroke quality and how different strokes connect to each other as a means of assembling a systematic/modular set to create harmonious letterforms from first principles.

A personal example lays out the practical use case of this principle in recreating pinned signage for an art deco building and basing those letterforms off of the existing address numerals "234." This set of shapes gives evidence of how the design for other forms in the set should treat rounds, straights and diagonals, and their connection points. Combined with the stroke weight, contrast between vertical and horizontal strokes, and absolute measurements for proportional relationships within letters and for letter spacing, this contains all the critical DNA information needed to create a full set of letters as a system.

As a practical exercise, 5 modular shapes or components can be used to create the letters from the Latin alphabet. This activity can take the form of cut-out shapes or shape stencils, the outlines from which a participant can build and combine shapes on the page to create letterforms. Within the workshop time, participants used tracing paper to copy from a printed set of the 5 shapes that would work at scale with a series of lines denoting the baseline, x-height, and extenders above and below.

Key takeaways from this exploration are the inherent modularity of the forms in the Latin alphabet, as well as the inherent limitations for some forms that require further consideration, as well as in the formation of alternate styles of letterforms.

In combination with the exercise, Frank Blokland's (2016) "Letter Model" was presented as a helpful framework for considering how modular shapes or components are used to harmoniously create the forms of a letter set or font. The model also begins to express the proportional relationships of stroke weight/width vs length (baseline to cap-height) of the forms, as well as counter-space proportions and letter spacing. The letter model is a constructed diagram, which in its most basic form is two sets of parallel vertical lines (expressing the width of a stroke) separated by two intersecting circles offset the same measurement as the pairs of vertical lines, their overlapping diameters serving as the distance between the two sets of lines.

It's worth noting that following the letter model very strictly is one of the best ways to design type badly: this model acts merely as a starting point for type designers to understand the Latin alphabet's modular nature and to establish the most basic proportions of space with particular forms. In a more nuanced understanding of the letter model, any shape(s) can be overlaid onto it and it can function as a method of producing a modular and harmonious set of letterforms, helping to define the strokes, contrast and connection treatments of strokes, the proportional spaces within forms, and the nature of stroke terminals. This idea was introduced in the workshop as a method for experimenting with the limitations of legibility of forms and abstraction: how weird can we get while still recognizing the letterform?

2. FORM–STROKE

Good type design maintains the motion of the stroke, a form that has a beginning, a middle, and an end.

On a continuum of visualizing language, four main forms can be given our attention: from handwriting to calligraphy, to lettering, and to typography or other mechanical reproduction systems. These can thus be categorized to make 4 quadrants across the two axes of writing strokes vs drawing shapes as its form, and adaptive vs structured as its formality for repetition. The 4 quadrants then arise as

1. adaptive writing/strokes: handwriting
2. structured writing/strokes: calligraphy
3. adaptive drawing/shapes: lettering
4. structured drawing/shapes: typography

The fundamental key to maintaining the vitality, motion, and overall expression of form from a scribal or calligraphic hand to lettering or type is to maintain the individual strokes in the form. The simple adage to "maintain the stroke" first came to me through Kevin King's teaching as part of the GDC Carl Dair Typography Workshops in Toronto in 2016, though as a concept it can surely be attributed to many other type designers and educators. Its meaning is two–fold in the context of type design: firstly, it applies generally to all forms of rendered letterforms in that the stroke quality should be consistent in every repeated instance (eg. the thickness or weight of a vertical stroke or a horizontal stroke should remain constant, and its quality, whether a shift in weight or tapering along the direction of a stroke occurs, etc). Secondly though, and more specifically to lettering and typography where the rendering of form is accomplished through the drawing of shapes, it is most important to render each stroke individually in the same way that a tool would write the strokes. This means that we are never rendering an outline of a complex form like the minuscule m, but we render three separate shape outlines that connect to create a final shape form.

When it comes to the practical rendering of letterforms of varied proportions and styles while maintaining the stroke weights and individual stroke motions, we require the Noordzij sketching method. Based in Gerrit Noordzij's concepts relating to tool–dependent stroke contrast in letterforms in his influential work 'The Stroke' (Noordzij, 1985), he introduces a method of sketching that easily replicates the nature and quality of an expansion or translation stroke for the rapid drafting of ideas.

A stroke always has a width and a direction; in the case of expansion, that stroke width varies from narrow to wide depending on the pressure exerted on the page (eg. as with a fine point calligraphic pen or fine tipped brush); in the case of translation, the tool (eg. wide nib pen or flat brush) is held at a constant angle against the surface of the page and the altering of direction will render a narrow or wide stroke. The sketching method replicates a stroke width with a back and forth hatching motion, altering the 'counter–point' (distance between the two edges of the stroke width) for an expansion contrast, and maintaining a constant counterpoint at a constant angle regardless of direction of the stroke movement for a translation contrast. This can be a challenging exercise at first, but with even a little practice the method can be grasped and used to great effect. Within the workshop, this is our next practical exercise: using the Noordzij sketching method to render the letter 'm' multiple times across a page, careful to maintain the strokes, rendering 3 strokes to create the form.

Aside from it making the structure of letterforms more evident to us, another important concept that comes from this sketching exercise is the aspect that the edges of the letterform can remain vague until we are ready to make those decisions about the form and counterforms; and this is a truth that holds for all visual rendering in the early stages of development whether in drawing, painting, and broadly across the plastic arts. Following the previous exercise, participants pass their page of 'm's to their neighbour with the best 'm' circled; using tracing paper over the sketches, each participant creates the outline edges for each of the 3 strokes in the selected m. This is repeated by passing the same sketch and tracing paper to the next participant to create their own outline on the selected sketch, and so forth. For each version of the same m sketch, there will be variations from each participant's hand and individual estimation of where the edge of each stroke lies.

3. SPACE–UNIFORMITY

Good type design is legibility structured through similarity and contrast.

Letterforms are really just "blobs with defects." I attribute this quote to Hannes Famira, one of my type design instructors at The Cooper Union, whose clever analogies were a constant delight as we learned fundamental and nuanced concepts. This adage does encapsulate an important truth though that the counterforms and apertures of our letters are perhaps the most important defining factors for recognition and legibility (Beier & Oderkerk, 2022). We can scribble a set of identical blobs on the whiteboard to make this point clearer. With an eraser, making an open aperture in the top left quadrant of one blob, and a counterform within the lower half will immediately yield the form of the minuscule 'a'—making an open aperture in the lower right quadrant of the second blob and a counterform within the upper half will immediately yield the form of the minuscule 'e'—this simple illustration has opened the eyes of many of my students to seeing type as form and space.

Another exercise can be practiced along these lines: "how open can our apertures and counters be? how closed can our apertures and counters be?" A quick sketching exercise can thus explore the limitations and the flexibility of form with attention to these integral defining factors of apertures and counters. In the workshop, we test the legibility of extremes compared between the four characters 'a, e, c, o.' The shaping of these counter spaces and apertures will tend to be quite similar within a set of letterforms, but their position and orientation then determines how recognizable and legible the form is.

To continue exploring legibility (and its partner, readability), we consider the other aspects of legibility and accessibility (which in turn can give us a clear checklist of options for defining contrasts or similarities between a pairing of typefaces):

- style/form
- stroke contrast
- width
- x-height
- counters
- apertures
- spacing (letter-, word-, line-)
- size

In the classroom, as in the workshop, the extremes of these comparisons work best to illustrate the ideas. Style and stroke contrasts will be inevitably linked: a good comparison of two fonts at the same point size is Maelstrom (Kris Sowersby, Klim Type) and Garamond. In our mind's eye, a simple and somewhat intuitive scale from highly expressive, swashy forms to simplified, mono-weight types can give us some sense that the most legible and readable fonts will be closer to the simple end rather than the overly expressive: in categorical terms, "display" and "ornamental" types generally will be less readable than moderate weight, moderate contrast, and moderate width serif or sans types across the spectrum of eras and formal differences. Ultimately the choice of style/form (the choice of a specific typeface) will be a decision based on the context and use-case of any project, but if it follows the guidelines of the following considerations for stroke contrast, width, and x-height, then your decision is a good one for legibility and readability.

High contrast of stroke weights in a letterform make recognition more difficult as the cognitive load is increased in our processing: a moderate contrast is ideal. Cognitive load is in simplest terms our ability to process and understand information, making logical connections with new information and recognizing information already experienced. The task of the designer is to ensure the lowest resistance to reading and understanding information.

A moderate width is also the ideal for letterforms. This plays into the cognitive load consideration as well, but related more specifically to the saccadic fixations that our eyes make in the process of reading (Minakata & Beier, 2021). The foveal or focus area of our eye is a very small 2 degrees, so the wider the characters of a word are, the less letters will be recognized, resulting in more eye movement and further processing power to take in more information from the parafoveal area (outside the area of focus). In the opposite case of using very condensed forms, we face the problem of recognition for the apertures and counter spaces. So we are left with moderate widths as being the most reliably legible forms.

When we talk about x-height (in relation to the cap-height), moderation is not the ideal: a higher x-height will result in effectively appearing to be a larger point size than other faces of exactly the same sizing from baseline to cap-height but with a lower x-height.

The higher x-height also ensures that there is ample space for larger counters and a more open aperture, the two key form-defining aspects already discussed.

In all, my rules for maximum accessibility and legibility of type focus on these three aspects primarily: stroke contrast should be moderate, character width should be moderate, and x-height should be high. Spacing and size are so often considered to be the intuitive and obvious choices that determine legibility and accessible design, but the research points more reliably and clearly to these three considerations of contrast, width, and x-height, so we should give them our attention.

4. SPACE–BALANCE

Good type design shapes space, both within the letterform and outside the letterform, for the word and for the line and for the page.

Spacing and size are not completely irrelevant of course in this conversation about legibility and readability. The final principles and exercises in the workshop revolve around shaping space; specifically focusing on letter space, word space, and line space.

"Counter space = letter space" is our primary determinant rule for spacing that can be attributed to Erik van Blokland, Carl Dair, Gerrit Noordzij, James Edmondson, Gerard Unger, and likely dozens of other type designers. The space between letterforms act as the glue for our words to stay together with balance and tension. The end goal of good letter spacing for the type designer is to optically balance the interior counter spaces a letterform with its sidebearings (the space to the left and right of every glyph; every pairing of characters have sidebearing spaces that combine to create the full letter space between those two characters). Calligraphers know this rule, especially as applied to the regularized horizontal rhythms of blackletter textura. Our last exercise involves a sequence of nnnn and managing the spacing between each, as related to the space of its counter; a second line of nnnn with a different counterspace will yield a different letter space. Condensed forms will yield less letter space, extended forms yield more letter space.

Another (and perhaps less intuitive) result of this spacing rule is that lighter weight letterforms with large counterspaces will have looser letter spacing, while heavy weight forms with tight counterspaces will have tighter letter spacing. But this also exhibits the effect of spatial frequency channels (Beier & Oderkerk, 2019) which can be applied to our understanding of spacing both horizontally (letter and word spacing) and vertically (line space) as related to the point size of the forms. A large headline or title demands tighter spacing both horizontally and vertically: the standard reading text line spacing of 120% becomes massively oversized for a headline. The opposite is entirely true as well: lines of very small point sizes of text set at standard 120% line space will seem overly tight and require extra space to increase the legibility. A basic explanation is that the details and edges (higher frequency channels) of forms are processed more dominantly at large sizes, while at small sizes the overall weight and proportions (lower frequency channels) take visual precedence. An analogy can be made about adjusting a picture frame on a wall: making adjustments very close we are processing more fine details and believe we're doing a fine job, but moving a few steps away we see how poorly the frame has been adjusted proportionally as we see the total mass and position related to the room, walls, and ceiling.

In much the same way, this educator often needs to take a few steps back from the fine details in order to grasp a clear view of how these principles integrate with and benefit the general design curricula. These exercises and concepts will certainly develop over time as we see their effect on students' confidence in exploring typographic rules and standards in their work.

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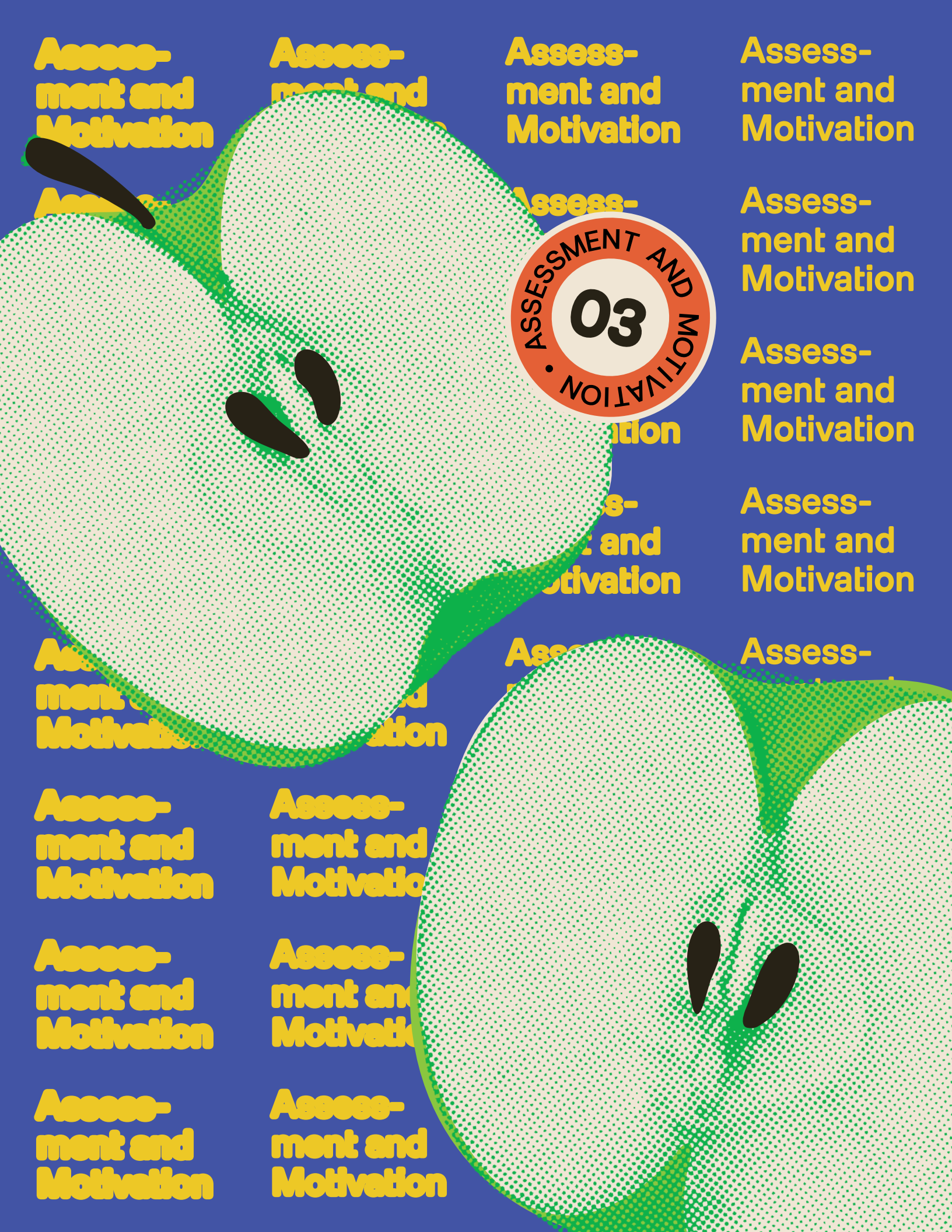
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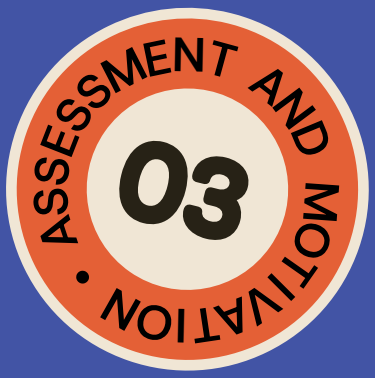
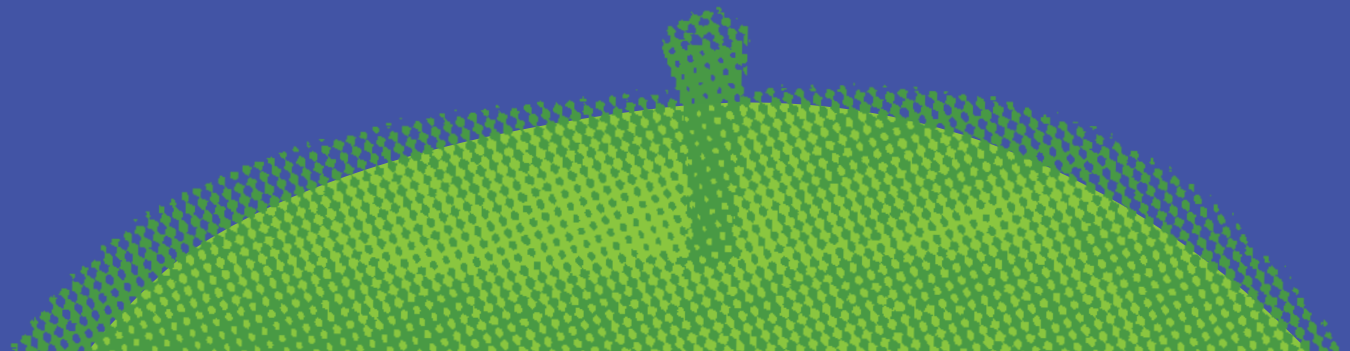


Assessment is one of the most powerful “hidden curricula” in design education: it quietly teaches students what matters, what risks are safe to take, and what kind of learner they are allowed to be. This section reframes assessment as a designed system—one that can either reinforce anxiety and compliance, or support curiosity, agency, and growth.

The contributions presented here take up assessment and course structure as levers for change. They examine how alternative grading frameworks can uphold high expectations while lowering the stakes that often shut down experimentation, and how co-designing a syllabus can increase student ownership while making learning goals more transparent and shared. In the ShiftShaping frame, motivation is not treated as a trait students do (or don’t) have; it is understood as something educators can cultivate through intentional structures—ones that invite trust, reduce fear of failure, and make room for meaningful creative risk.



High Expectations, Low Risk:

Hybrid Ungrading as a Catalyst for Student Growth

DIANA VARMA
RGD

LINK TO TALK ↗

ABSTRACT

Traditional grading systems can prioritize compliance and performance over learning, risk-taking, and student growth. This paper examines a 'hybrid ungrading' approach implemented in a beginner-level undergraduate typography course at a Canadian university. Blending traditional project-based assessment with a competency-based, pass/fail skills demonstration framework, the model lowers perceived risk while maintaining high academic expectations. Educator experience suggests that hybrid ungrading increases student engagement, technical skill retention, transparency, and trust, while reducing grade bargaining and fear of failure. By positioning ungrading as a flexible entry point, rather than an all-or-nothing shift, this document offers a practical, scalable pathway for educators exploring alternative grading systems.

KEYWORDS

Ungrading
Alternative assessment
Competency-based evaluation
Design education

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Introduction

As educators, we are world builders. As bell hooks (1994) illuminates in *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, "The classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy" (p. 12).

As educators, we have the ability to take action—however small—to make a difference for our students. This may take the form of how an educator arranges a space, creates opportunities for people in the room to intentionally forge new connections, or looking students in the eyes and sincerely saying, "I trust you." These small actions can have outsized effects. Like a seed planted and beginning to take root, this first step will spawn and sustain life that will far overshadow the initial action. As celebrated educator Sir Ken Robinson (2015) states in his book *Creative Schools: The Grassroots Revolution That's Transforming Education,* "Gardeners know that they don't make plants grow. They don't attach the roots, glue the leaves, and paint the petals. Plants grow themselves. The job of the gardener is to create the best conditions for that to happen" (Robinson & Aronica, 2015, p. 102).

LESS THAN OPTIMAL CONDITIONS

Students of all ages and stages understand a familiar process: submitting an assignment into a (physical or digital) black hole of the grading drop box, where it resurfaces days or weeks later with some feedback and a numerical or letter grade that tells us its worth—and, too often by implication, an individual's worth.

Ungrading scholar, Alfie Kohn (2020), asserts that too many students in today's learning institutions believe that the primary purpose of school is to get A grades. Course content is crammed into students' heads only long enough to perform for marks, after which time the information is actively or passively forgotten. Further, when we assign a letter or number grade, we risk giving students the impression that if we don't value the work, nobody will; that it is inherently not valuable. Yet what may be most valuable—and most difficult to evaluate through traditional means—is risk, vulnerability, and perseverance. Grades rarely reward these inputs; instead, they privilege outputs, evaluation often filtered through a single instructor's lens.

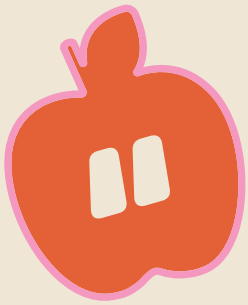
As a neurotypical, middle-class, white student, I loved being graded. It was a source of pride, joy, and validation. As a teacher, I've developed a healthy skepticism of traditional grading structures. It is a source of concern, curiosity, and new ways of thinking about evaluation.

Grades (as most of us experience them today) were invented fairly recently. Our familiar letter grade system can be traced back to a small institution in the United States called Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts in 1897 (Mount Holyoke College, 2023). In European historical contexts, oral examinations that were graded were common, but they were structured more like debates than modern exams. During the 18th & 19th centuries, written exams at Oxford and Cambridge became necessary because of increases in enrollment; the need to scale up to accommodate more students. Even then, pass/fail systems were common, and students were often permitted to retake exams until they achieved a passing result (Blum, 2020).

RETHINKING THE SYSTEM OF GRADES

About ten years ago, I began asking myself a simple question: Is there a better way? This question led me down a rabbit hole, exploring the who, what, where, when, why, and how of student grading. I began to put this knowledge into practice in my design and communications classes in 2018, experimenting with ungrading in both minor and major ways, with successes and room for improvement along the way. Reexamining my preconceived notions of grading has revealed grading's role in perpetuating colonial structures, the vast variability in what a particular grade represents, and the ways traditional grading may hinder students' transition to what lies beyond the classroom, among other insights.

The results I've experienced have been paradigm-shifting. While no system is without its challenges, I've observed increased community collaboration, transparency, and trust within student cohorts, alongside decreased competitive individualism, grade bargaining, and less need for centralized, top-down control. The effects have been a powerful shift towards a more grounded and human-centred approach to higher education.



We therefore approach the classroom as a collaborative space, where "expertise" is shared and co-created.

A New Path Forward: Ungrading

"Ungrading" (also called alternative grading) is loosely defined as purposefully eliminating or minimizing the use of points or letters to assess student work. Some aspects of ungrading might also include letting students decide their grade or eliminating grades entirely in favor of qualitative evaluation only (Barnard College, n.d.).

It is closely aligned with decolonizing pedagogical approaches that value multiple voices in the classroom and work to dismantle hierarchical power structures. Ungrading also aligns with Universal Design for Learning (UDL) by supporting choice-based assessments across subject matter, topic, scope, and modes of delivery. Ungrading balances academic rigour and flexible options through a human-centred approach. In short, ungrading can be understood as grading for growth.

My goal in adopting ungrading practices is to help students engage with learning opportunities with courage and curiosity. Grades are often an impediment—not a gateway—to this type of growth. Grades can feel like building higher walls rather than extending longer tables where community and belonging are possible. Grades may reinforce students' roles as compliant cogs in an existing system, rather than offering space to imagine and build entirely new ones. Grades feel like a boxing match, pitting students against me, against the topics, and against other students, in a space where my goal is to teach students how to dance with emotion and humanity in creative work.

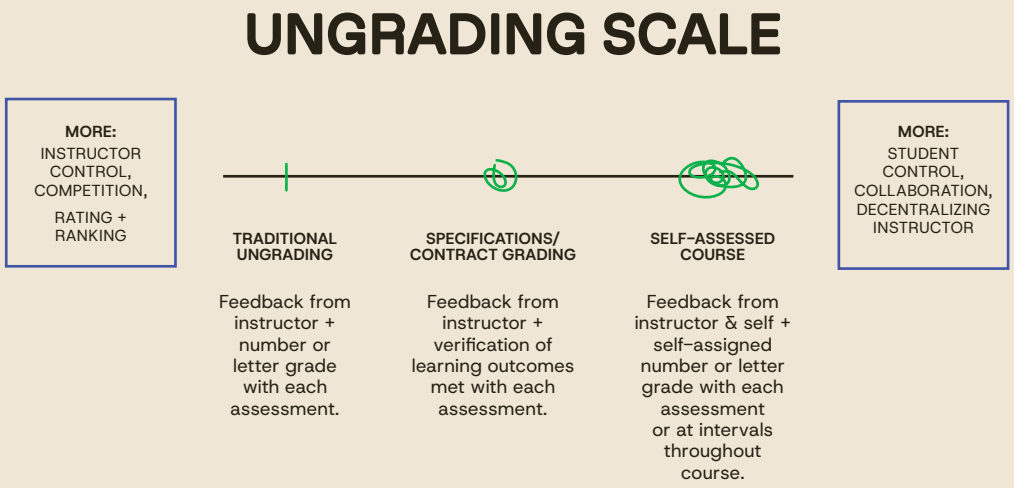
Ungrading can reduce the distraction that grades introduce, allowing students to focus on meaningful feedback and to engage with course content in actionable ways that support industry readiness. It shifts the central question from "What do I need to do for an A?" to "What am I actually learning?"

UNGRADING FRAMEWORK

Ungrading is a flexible, inclusive, and academically rigorous framework that can be adapted to the needs of a given classroom. As shown in Figure 1, grading methods exist along a continuum; traditional grading on one side and a completely ungraded course on the other (and I've found the latter is possible even within the constraints of a modern Canadian university education context). The continuum presented identifies three primary categories of grading approaches, with room for additional specificity along the spectrum. No single approach is inherently better or worse; rather, each serves different pedagogical goals. Over the course of a single academic year, I employed all three grading structures across my courses: traditional grading, specifications grading, and a fully self-graded model. These experiences demonstrate that there are multiple viable versions of ungraded classrooms.

Figure 1 ↓

Three Major Categories Ungrading Scale



Note →

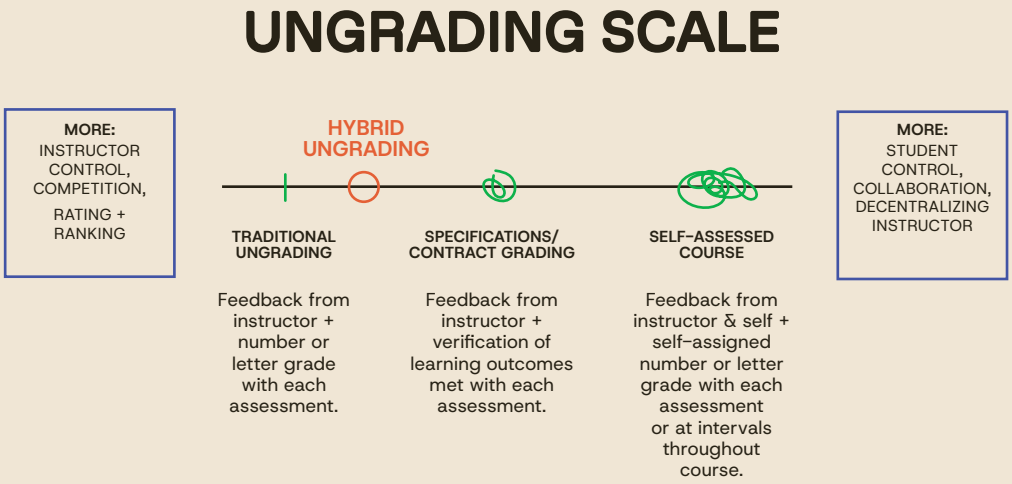
A continuum of assessment models showing a progression from traditional grading through specifications or contract grading to self-assessed courses, emphasizing changing roles of instructors and students in feedback, control, and evaluation.

HYBRID UNGRADING

In Fall 2024, I was scheduled to co-teach a beginner-level typography course (GCM – 230 Typography), which I taught several times previously. On one hand, the practical demands of a busy term favoured maintaining the existing assessment and grading structure. On the other, the experimental impulse to rethink evaluation from the ground up remained compelling. My co-instructor—balancing research obligations and another course—favoured the former approach, while I lingered with the latter. This productive tension ultimately led to a third option: hybrid ungrading, illustrated in Figure 2. This middle ground allowed us to avoid a complete overhaul of the course while blending traditional and competency-based assessment frameworks. The result was a flexible, yet rigorous approach, which gave students more autonomy and opportunities to improve through failure and feedback.

Figure 2 ↓

Hybrid Ungrading Added to the Scale



Note →

A continuum of assessment models showing a progression from traditional grading through specifications or contract grading to self-assessed courses, emphasizing changing roles of instructors and students in feedback, control, and evaluation, specifically emphasizing a new addition to the continuum—hybrid ungrading, positioned between traditional grading and specifications/contract grading.

HYBRID UNGRADING IN ACTION

GCM 230 – Typography primarily enrolled second-year undergraduate students studying Graphic Communications Management at Toronto Metropolitan University, for whom the course was a degree requirement. A smaller group of students from other disciplines also enrolled in the course as an elective. There were four sections of this course with approximately 50 students in each one. My co-instructor and I were each responsible for two of the four sections. I will focus on my experience in the sections I taught.

The learning outcomes of the course (as stated in the syllabus) are as follows.

- Upon completion of this course, students should be able to:
- Use important typographic terminology in the context of their work and others' work.
- Identify and apply type classification groupings to historical and modern typefaces.
- Construct a variety of short and long documents in Adobe InDesign through completion of course projects.
- Identify and apply best practices of typography in the context of their own work and others' work.
- Pair typefaces in a variety of contexts for different purposes.
- Identify ways that typeset projects can be made more accessible through choices in marking and spacing.

Students were evaluated in three main categories:

- **Projects (60%)**
  Three projects, each worth 20%, assessed using traditional rubrics
- **Skills Demonstration (28%)**
  28 pass/fail competencies, ungraded
- **Attendance (12%)**
  One point awarded for each class attended

An important outcome of this course is for students to learn how to use Adobe InDesign, which is the foundation for several subsequent courses in the Graphic Communications Management degree program. In earlier iterations of the course, I observed that students often completed the class with strong theoretical knowledge of typographic principles but only a basic functional understanding of InDesign's typographic tools. This gap became especially evident in later courses where GCM 230 served as a prerequisite and more advanced InDesign skills were assumed.

This disconnect between theory and application was a key motivator for revising the grading structure. Rather than redesigning the entire evaluation framework, we retained the existing project structure and introduced a skills demonstration component. I developed a spreadsheet outlining 28 essential InDesign skills that students should be able to demonstrate by the end of the course, including foundational skills

in InDesign carried through from the pre-requisite course (from Document Setup to Packaging a file), through to use of typographic tools (adjusting kerning, leading, hyphenation and justification), through to tools for creating long documents (primarily Parent Pages and Styles).

Below is a list of the 28 skills identified in this iteration of the course:

- File Management – appropriate document setup (size, bleed, margins)
- File Management – file Packaged correctly for submission (including zipped and compressed with logical naming convention)
- File Management – Interactive PDF included in submission
- File Management – Print PDF included in submission
- File Management – activation and use of Adobe Fonts
- Parent Pages – minimum of 2 Parent Pages with a minimum of 2 elements on each (ex: frames, shapes, colour blocks, etc.)
- Parent Pages – 'skeleton' template created (with no content)
- Parent Pages – auto page numbering used correctly and effectively
- Paragraph Styles – minimum of 3 styles used, including 1 that uses the 'based-on' feature used
- Paragraph Styles – logically organized
- Paragraph Styles – no local overrides (except for manually-kerned text)
- Character Styles – universally adaptable to entire document (ex: italicize)
- Frames – frame linking (all frames in the same section linked)
- Frames – use of multi-column frame
- Frames – text wrap around frame with appropriate offset
- Frames – using as few frames as possible
- Frames – use of column break and/or frame break and/or page break
- Grids – baseline grid, multi-column grid or modular grid created and used
- Readability – appropriate white space / margins
- Readability – no widows or orphans
- Readability – justified text with even word spacing and appropriate hyphenation
- Readability – left aligned text with minimal ragged edge
- Readability – kerning used for large headlines
- Automated Table of Contents – set up/attempted

Our methods focus on building a classroom that includes ways of learning that have traditionally been excluded or underexplored in the classroom.

- Automated Table of Contents – styles correctly applied; formatting does not change when updated
- Tweaking type – single returns only (use of space before / space after to adjust whitespace throughout document)
- Tweaking Type – drop caps/enlarged capital(s)
- Interactive Element – ex: hyperlink, button, etc.

Each skill was assessed on a pass/fail basis. Students were required to identify which skills they were intentionally demonstrating and where those skills could be found within their project files. This information was tracked on a spreadsheet submitted alongside each project. The system was iterative: if a student did not successfully demonstrate a skill in an earlier project, they could attempt it again in a subsequent submission and still receive credit. Only skills explicitly identified by the student (as shown in Figure 3) were assessed and assigned a score of 1 or 0 (pass or fail). Skills not identified were left unscored rather than penalized.

Figure 3 ↓

Skills Demonstration Checklist

Instructions: File > Make a Copy of this Skills Demonstration spreadsheet that you will use throughout the semester. Please include either a .xls or .pdf of this spreadsheet with EACH submission. Below, please identify **which skills** you're demonstrating in a given project and **where** they can be found in your submission.

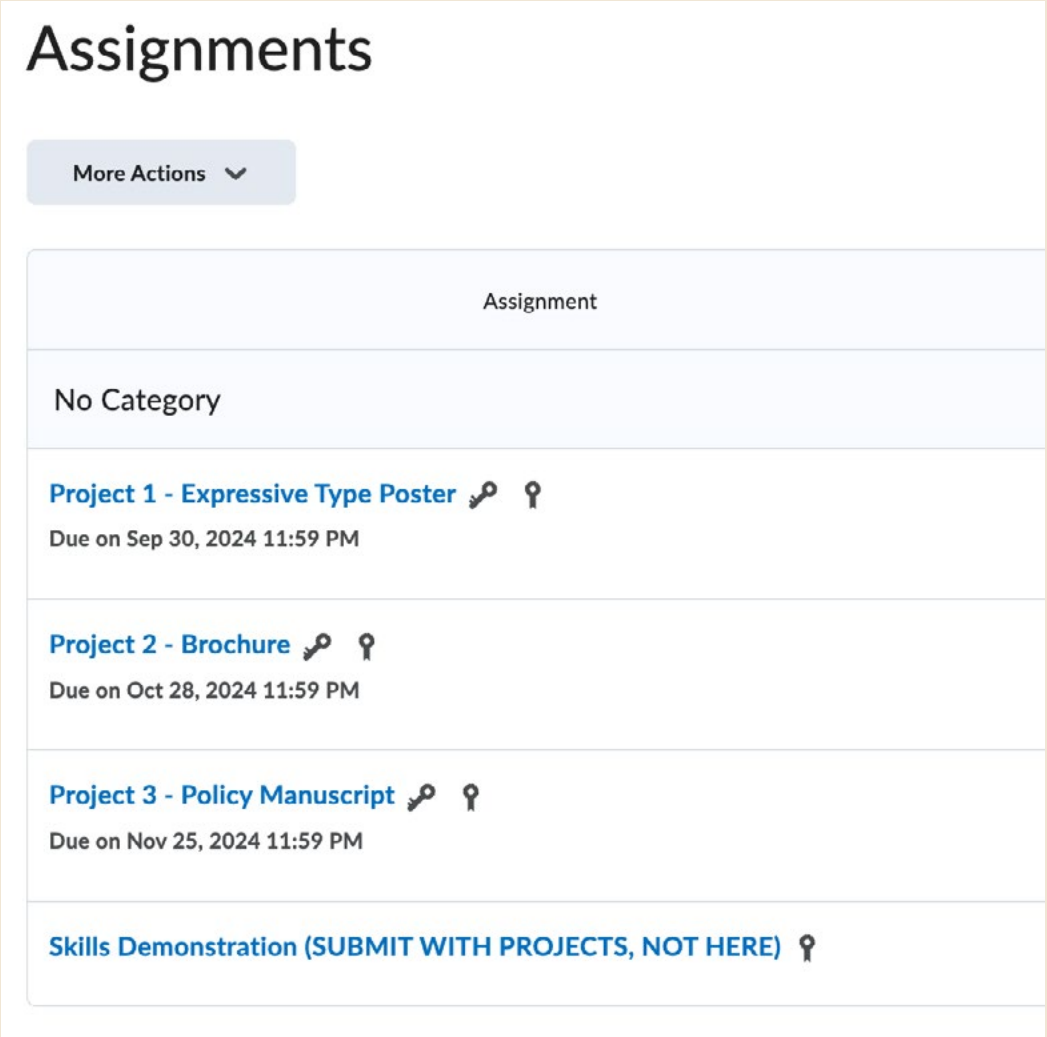
Skill	Project 1	Project 2	Project 3
File Management - appropriate document setup (size, bleed, margins)	Yes	Recieved project 1	
File Management - file Packaged correctly for submission (including zipped and compressed with logical naming convention)	Yes	Recieved project 1	
File Management - Interactive PDF included in submission	Yes	Recieved project 1	
File Management - Print PDF included in submission	Yes	Recieved project 1	
File Management - activation and use of Adobe Fonts	Yes	Recieved project 1	
Parent Pages - minimum of 2 Parent Pages with a minimum of 2 elements on each (ex: frames, shapes, colour blocks, etc.)		Yes- I used Parent Pages to create a page number template and also the layout for my design which included text frames and image frames.	
Parent Pages - 'skeleton' template created (with no content)		Yes- I used Parent Pages to create a blank template with my image frames, text frames and a few of the basic graphics with no written content.	
Parent Pages - auto page numbering used correctly and effectively		Yes- I used parent pages to set up auto page numbering	
Paragraph Styles - minimum of 3 styles used, including 1 that uses the 'based-on' feature used		Yes- I used a total of 15 paragraph styles. The 'subheading' paragraph syle is based on the 'heading style.'	
Paragraph Styles - logically organized		Yes- I used 5 folders to organize my styles: Page Numbers, Headings, Copy, Covers, Table of Contents	
Paragraph Styles - no local overrides (except for manually-kerned text)		Yes- I ensured to check this using the Style Override Highlighter	
Character Styles - universally adaptable to entire document (ex: italicize)		Yes- I created two character styles: Italic and Extrabold, which are used throughout the document.	
Frames - frame linking (all frames in the same section linked)			
Frames - use of multi-column frame		Yes- Three of the pages in the spread use multi-column text frames. (See page 3,5,6)	
Frames - text wrap around frame with appropriate offset		Yes- There is a text wrap around the image frame on page 4 and around the water droplet graphic on page 5.	

Note →

Example of a student-completed skills demonstration checklist submitted alongside each project, in which students identify the technical and design skills demonstrated and indicate where evidence of each skill can be found within their submission.

Figure 4 ↓

Course Assignment Dropbox with Opportunities for Multiple Student Attempts

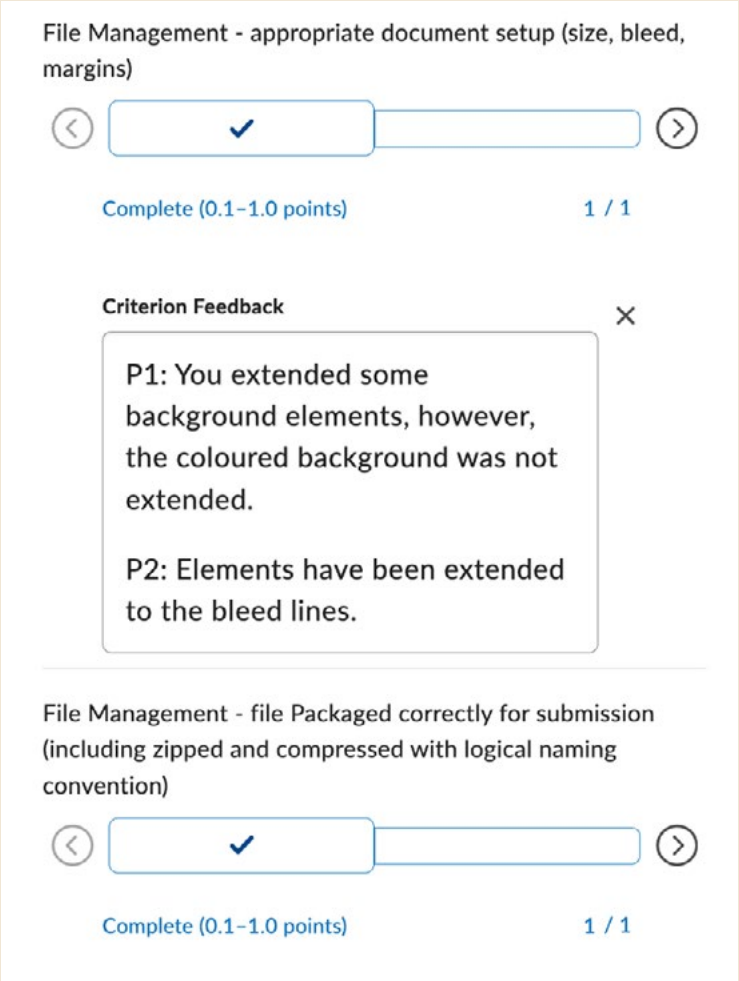


Note →

Screenshot of the D2L Brightspace assignment dropbox showing three major project submissions and a separate Skills Demonstration assignment, structured to allow students to iteratively document demonstrated skills across multiple projects throughout the course.

Figure 5 ↓

Skills Demonstration Rubric Inside of D2L Brightspace



Note →

Screenshot of rubric-based feedback for two of twenty-eight assessed skills, illustrating how a student did not initially demonstrate a file management skill in the first project but successfully demonstrated the same skill in a subsequent project, receiving credit towards their final course grade.

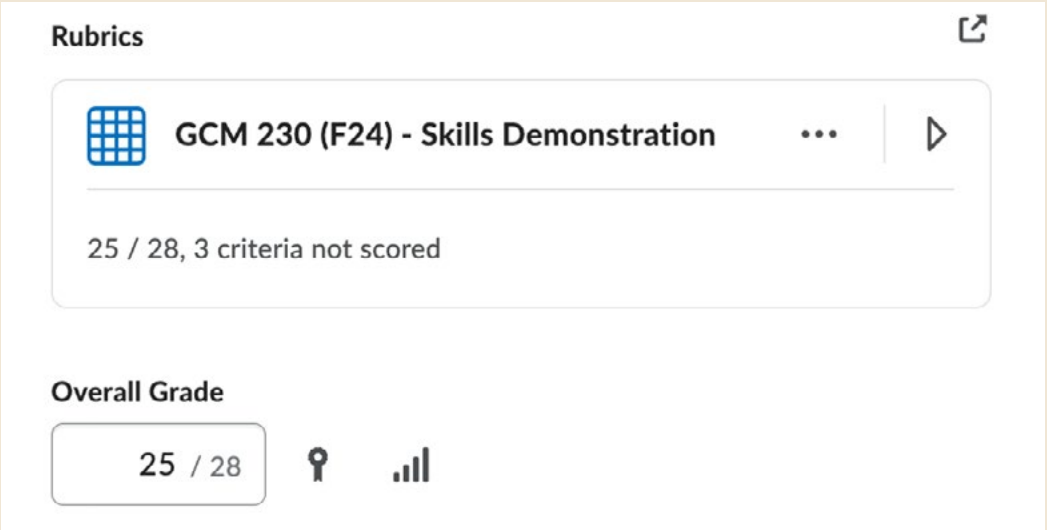
This structure invited sustained dialogue with students and created space for additional opportunities to learn technical skills in ways I had not previously experienced when teaching this course. I intentionally set aside time at the end of several classes to revisit skills that students requested to see demonstrated again. Course attendance increased (likely influenced in part by the increased technical expectations and in part by the explicit evaluation of attendance), and there was a noticeable improvement in student engagement with the technical components of the class. Students who attended regularly consistently achieved stronger outcomes than those who did not.

Providing concrete technical criteria allowed students to focus on specific, achievable goals over the duration of the semester.

Providing concrete technical criteria allowed students to focus on specific, achievable goals over the duration of the semester. This approach struck a balance between the pressure to "do it right the first time"—or risk losing the opportunity for a high grade—and accountability for learning skills iteratively over time. The core strength of the system lies in placing high expectations on students to learn and demonstrate challenging material, while simultaneously reducing risk when proficiency is not achieved on the first attempt.

When examined as a standalone assignment worth nearly one third of the final course grade (28%), the Skills Demonstration project yielded the following outcomes across 88 students in two sections during the Fall 2024 semester. Fifty-one students (58%) earned a score equivalent to an A (at least 22 of 28 skills, or 80% or higher, as shown in Figure 6). Notably, 11 students (12%) successfully demonstrated all 28 skills. Fifteen students (17%) earned a score equivalent to a B (at least 19 of 28, or 70% or higher), 10 students (11%) earned a C (at least 16 of 28, or 60% or higher), and seven students (8%) earned a D (at least 14 of 28, or 50% or higher). Five students (6%) earned a score equivalent to an F (fewer than 14 of 28 skills).

Figure 6 ↓
A Student's Final Skills Demonstration Result After Three Assignments



Note →
Screenshot of a student's final Skills Demonstration rubric score, showing 25 of 28 skills completed, with three criteria intentionally left unscored because the student did not identify those skills as having been demonstrated.

Pros and Cons of Hybrid Ungrading System for Students and Instructors

As with any evaluative framework—traditional or otherwise—hybrid ungrading presents both benefits and challenges for students and instructors.

PRO: STUDENTS

A significant benefit for students was the opportunity to "fail forward" through the iterative evaluation process. Built-in feedback loops meant that students could work to showcase a skill multiple times, embedding both specificity and safety nets into the system. This structure supported the development of industry-relevant technical skills while reducing the punitive consequences of early mistakes.

Additionally, a clearer and more transparent evaluation structure helped students understand precisely how to work toward the grade they wished to achieve in a substantial portion of the course. Evaluation methods can often feel opaque or inconsistent to learners; by contrast, the explicit articulation of 28 discrete skills removed guesswork from the assessment process. This clarity provided students with a concrete roadmap, increasing their sense of responsibility for learning while simultaneously reducing stress.

Research suggests that grit is a stronger predictor of success than grades alone (Weir, 2020). Grit involves consistent effort, resilience in the face of difficulty, and perseverance when tasks become challenging or less intrinsically motivating. It requires deliberate practice, recovery from failure, and sustained commitment over time. The structure of this grading system explicitly rewards these behaviours.

PRO: INSTRUCTORS

Creative problem-solving and technical execution are both core curricular goals within the Graphic Communications Management program at Toronto Metropolitan University. This framework supported both objectives by allowing students to demonstrate creative thinking through traditionally graded project briefs, while separately and clearly assessing technical proficiency through file construction and execution. The result was a more balanced evaluation of creative and technical competencies.

Another key benefit was increased academic rigour. While students who focused primarily on creative problem-solving and typographic principles performed well, exceptional outcomes required the successful application of industry-standard technical skills.

The pass/fail structure also enabled instructors and teaching assistants to evaluate student work with greater consistency. Traditional grading often involves a high cognitive load, requiring assessors to assign fine-grained distinctions that may vary across submissions. In contrast, clearly defined pass/fail criteria reduced ambiguity and improved reliability.

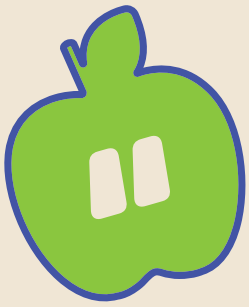
CON: STUDENTS

The primary challenge for students was the initial learning curve associated with an unfamiliar grading structure. However, because this approach was hybrid in nature, the barrier to entry remained relatively low, as the course continued to rely on traditional assessments and rubric-based evaluative structures familiar to students. Compared to fully competency-based or ungraded models, the learning curve was modest and manageable.

CON: INSTRUCTORS

The major downside for instructors is that the detailed nature of this checklist system meant some additional time to evaluate student work. This was somewhat mitigated by asking students to identify specifically which skills they were aiming to show, including where in their documents we could find some of the more specific skills demonstrated (kerning, multi-column frames, and interactive text, for example). When grading support was available, assigning a dedicated teaching assistant to the evaluation of skills demonstration further streamlined the process. It proved more efficient to remain focused on either technical evaluation or traditional grading, rather than alternating between the two.

Conclusion



Lasting change tends to emerge through small, incremental shifts at the level of the individual classroom, in much the way growth unfolds in a garden.

Educational systems rarely change all at once through sweeping policy reforms or comprehensive curricular overhauls. Instead, lasting change tends to emerge through small, incremental shifts at the level of the individual classroom, in much the way growth unfolds in a garden. Some plants, such as lettuces, sprout within days; their results are quick, visible, and immediately encouraging. Others, like oak trees or bamboo, spend years developing roots before anything meaningful appears above the surface. Both forms of growth are valid, and both depend on patience, care, and fostering the right conditions.

Ungrading frameworks offer flexible and transparent systems that allow students and instructors to focus on the central purposes of higher education—learning, growth, and meaning-making—rather than the administrative mechanics of grading. I understand my role as an educator to be that of a space-holder, world-builder, and curiosity igniter. A course typically offers 36 or more hours of shared time—an expansive and meaningful container within the context of busy lives—and my goal is to fill that space with relevant, timely learning experiences centred on the people in the room and sustained through trust and community. Ungrading frameworks support these pedagogical aims by shifting the tone of a course toward ongoing growth from the very first hour together.

As educators, we do not make our students grow. Our work is quieter and more deliberate, focused on tending the conditions in which growth becomes possible. We balance the soil, remove obstacles, and create light. Small changes to assessment—such as adopting and iterating a hybrid ungrading framework—may appear modest in isolation, but over time they cultivate the conditions for deeper, more durable learning to take root. And once that growth begins, it often exceeds what seemed possible in the small, early life contained within the original seed.

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Co-Designing a Syllabus: A Case Study

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LINK TO TALK ↗

ABSTRACT

As the landscape in which creative professionals work evolves, so too must the ways in which they are trained. Now more than ever, critical thinking and a strong creative voice are necessary tools for success in creative professions, and so the training of creative professionals needs to hone these skills. Presented here is a case study examining an attempt at co-designing a course's syllabus with the learners directly. The aim in this approach is to develop the students' metacognitive skills and foster a classroom environment learners feel empowered to think and make beyond established boundaries. In the first week of term, the students participated in a co-design session with the intent of collaboratively designing the course's syllabus for the term. By including students in the process of designing a course, they are forced to reckon with their learning to date and how they both need and want to grow.

KEYWORDS

Pedagogical methodologies
Pedagogical praxis
Design futures
Co-design methodologies

AUTHOR BIO

Dani Sayeau (they/them) is a Toronto based UX researcher, professor, and medical illustrator. They're currently part-time faculty in Sheridan College's Illustration program and do user research at Q30 design. Their current interests are in the role of metacognition in arts education and complex systems design. They hold a Master of Science in Biomedical Communications from the University of Toronto and are currently enjoying learning how to use a throwing wheel and make OK pottery.

1. Background

As we face increasingly complex structural issues as a society, from socio-economic stratification, climate change, and the rise of AI in creative industries, I posit that intentional and thoughtful design will become more important than ever before. As will having design practitioners who are unafraid of tackling complex problems and the systems they're a part of. This starts in the classroom, in fostering an environment where students feel safe and empowered to question their curriculum and take an active role in shaping their learning. How can we expect the next generation of creative practitioners to feel comfortable challenging authority and systems if the structure they're learning within discourages them from reflecting on and questioning it? As the nature of creative work shifts through the rise of AI tools, there is a lot of uncertainty around the future of our work, which raises some difficult questions for us as educators: How do we help our students succeed in this constantly changing world? What skills are going to be most important as automation becomes more present? What value do learners see in an arts education at this particular moment in time? What's motivating them to be in our classrooms, and what do they want to get out of their education?

Operating on the idea that one of the most important things creatives have to offer in the rapidly evolving world of generative AI and technology is our unique voices and perspectives, our way of thinking. These things become something that, in addition to our craft, our training needs to help us hone. An important part of finding our voice and developing a point of view is metacognition. To understand not just the craft but our relationship to it, to be able to reflect on the process, on the work itself, and how it fits into the bigger picture. At the end of the day, the finished visuals we produce are only the tip of the iceberg; it's the thought and perspective that make it what it is. Metacognition is a fundamental skill for all of us, not just students, in honing our conceptual skills, in solving problems, in working autonomously, and in being able to grow from our mistakes. Developing this skill in students requires room for self-reflection; not just on lecture material, but also on their own thinking, process, and challenges. Metacognitive skills being centred in the classroom can better prepare learners to think critically, and develop a deeper sense of self-awareness that will only help them to establish their own unique voice and point of view.

What if, by allowing students to have a hand in shaping what they learn over the semester, we're able to create a space where they feel more intrinsically motivated to engage with the course materials?

Centring metacognitive skills in a curriculum comes with its own set of challenges. Historically, we tend to rely on what Freire calls the "Banking Model" of education, where we as faculty are the authority, depositing knowledge into the hands of our students (Freire, 1970/2018). What if, instead, we created a space that aims to recognize the experience and skills students are already bringing to our classrooms? By challenging the very dynamic that tends to underpin a classroom, can we further push learners' critical thinking skills? What if, by allowing students to have a hand in shaping what they learn over the semester, we're able to create a space where they feel more intrinsically motivated to engage with the course materials? What if, in asking learners what they want to learn and where they want to grow both at the outset of the course and across all major projects, they are forced to reckon with their own interests, goals, strengths and weaknesses—flexing their metacognitive muscles. In turn, these well-exercised metacognitive muscles should enable our students to be creative practitioners with strong critical thinking skills who are capable of navigating the constantly changing industries they'll be graduating into. Freire suggests that the transformative power of education doesn't stop at the classroom door; it continues into the wider society. When learners recognise injustices and have the tools to challenge them, they can actively participate in shaping a more equitable world (Freire, 1970/2018).

When I was presented with the opportunity to design a third year "Special Topics in Illustration" course for Sheridan's Illustration, I found myself asking: "Who am I to tell the students what they need to know when we haven't even met yet?" How can we as educators engage in a meaningful and dialectical relationship with our students when we place ourselves above them as an authority? If they are experts in their own learning, then the classroom should make space to accommodate this on a structural level. As an instructor, I don't want to just deposit knowledge. Instead, I wanted to take a more dialogic approach to this class. If critical thinking is what shifts the classroom from a transactional dynamic to one where learners become active participants in their learning—to challenge norms, and ask questions, then it should be the foundation of the class (Freire, 1970/2018). Why not start with the course materials themselves? From these questions came the concept for the case study presented in these proceedings. I planned to try collaborative course design, using Co-Design and UX Design techniques to

collaboratively build the syllabus for the semester with the incoming students. In doing this, I posited that two things might happen over the course of the term:

1. By letting the students drive their course contents, they will be able to more deeply engage with their learning & will have to develop their metacognitive skills to do so.
2. The structure of the course itself will challenge traditional teacher–student dynamics, empowering students to voice their thoughts on what skills they want to build and where they think it's important to grow; decentering authority and allowing the teacher's role to become one grounded in subject matter expertise.

2. Methodology

To preface the methods used in the co–design session, it is important to establish context. This co–design session was run in an upper year course with third year students in Sheridan College's Illustration program. This was an elective course called "Special Topics in Illustration," where students had the choice between several different courses, each covering different subject areas. Before the start of the semester, they would have selected this course based on a brief course description, which serves as the basis for the working session; by registering in the course, they have presumably agreed to the direction the course description suggested. For reference, here is the provided course description:

"This will be an inquiry–based course emphasizing curiosity about and exploration of complex topics. Assignment topics may range from scientific to fantastical. Rather than focusing on a specific topic, this course will be a chance to take a deep dive into the intricate and complex, where you will learn to take your findings and create work that effectively communicates information about what you've discovered." (Sayeau. 2025)

As part of the Illustration program's requirements, third year students are required to complete a co–op term over the summer before beginning fourth year, and the fourth year of the program is centred on their thesis project. This means the second semester of third year is a complicated time for our students; they all have different interests and areas they want to explore, they're working towards

building a portfolio of work that matches the future career they want to build, and they're all trying to grow different skills in relation to these two things. Due to this context, a more rigid course structure isn't well suited to propelling these students forward to their highly individual goals and areas of interest. This made for an opportunity to meet the students in dialogue about where they wanted to grow and what they wanted to get out of the semester, while hopefully making the coursework itself something that would meet their individual needs. This is also a good place in the program to really push their critical thinking and problem-solving skills; they're no longer caught up in the fundamentals, but are rather somewhere in the process of finding their own creative voice. An approach like this may not be as well suited to skills based courses or courses where the learning outcomes are more centred on technical skills; it also may not be as appropriate in courses earlier in a program, such as the first semester of first year, though that doesn't mean ideas of collaboration may not suit these contexts either. This co-design session was conducted during the first week of the term.

There is also a tension in this method that needs to be balanced—the needs and interests of the learners and the college and curriculum's set learning outcomes. Thus, the co-design session methodology needed to reflect a few key questions:

- How do I balance the student's choices with the college's set learning outcomes?
- How do I get a good sense of what the students want to learn, what are the right questions to ask them?
- How do we come to a consensus about the road forward as a group?
- What will this approach mean for the assignments that will make up this course?
- What if this approach is really overwhelming and hard on the students?

There was also the question of student participation—How do I get students to trust the process? How do I get them to engage enthusiastically in this exercise? There isn't a great answer to this beyond trusting that they will and setting a tone in the classroom from the very beginning that encourages honesty and participation.

The methodology for the co-design session was developed to mirror strategic consultation and UX research techniques used for the collaborative generation of project plans that kept all of the aforementioned factors in mind. The format used for this sessions was ultimately quite simple:

1. Distribute sticky notes, writing supplies, and stickers throughout the room.
2. Ask the students a single clear research question, write it on the board (or project it to a screen)
3. Give the students 10 minutes to write as many answers as come to mind on their sticky notes during this period.
4. Gather the whole room around the board and have the students place their stick notes on the board. Allow them to explain their contributions if they'd like.
5. As a group, discuss the notes on the board.
6. Collectively re-organize the sticky notes by theme. Discuss where more ambiguous sticky notes might fall together. Label the theme groups so they're easy to quickly refer to.
7. Using their stickers, students will vote on the thematic groups they find most interesting. Each student has 5 votes to do with what they wish; If they are very passionate about something they may choose to put all 5 votes on that theme. They were given 5 minutes to vote.
8. Discuss the results. What groups have the most votes? Does anyone feel like something important to them has been excluded from these major areas? If so, how might it relate to what's been chosen?
9. Document the board, and then take it down.

This process should be repeated multiple times to cover multiple research questions. The first question should be a soft one, meant as an introduction to the exercise; think of it as both a practice round for what will likely be a new format for the students and an icebreaker to get them comfortable talking in front of the group and discussing with one another. For the first introductory question only the instructor should participate. This achieves three things:

1. It demonstrates the technique and process with a higher degree of confidence.
2. It sets the tone for the subsequent questions, the instructor's level of candidness and openness will influence student attitudes in subsequent questions.
3. It balances the vulnerability inherent to sharing wants, goals, and aspirations in a minimal way, by offering some of their own hopes the instructor is engaging in a reciprocal dialogue with the students rather than an extractive one. After the first question the instructor continued to participate in the discussion of sticky notes and ask probing questions but refrained from contributing their own sticky notes, allowing the students to own the direction of the discussions.

For the co-design session presented here a series of three questions were asked:

1. What topics interest you?
2. What do you want to learn?
3. What kinds of things do you want to make?

Question 1 served as this session's introductory question, though the results still influenced the kinds of examples incorporated in later lectures. Questions 2 and 3 had a degree of preface to them to balance institutional requirements.

2.1 WHAT DO YOU WANT TO LEARN?

This question was used to develop the road map for the course; the kinds of skills and areas of interest the students would highlight here would be used to make the week by week outline for the class and inform lecture and lab contents.

In preface to this exercise, students were presented with the college's learning outcomes for the course and told that these would influence the direction of the course alongside the input they provide. These were the set learning outcomes:

- Communicate research and project proposals in written, verbal, and visual form.
- Evaluate effectiveness of problem-solving methods in response to specific client challenges.
- Develop illustrations to fit the communication strategies of varied markets.

- Synthesize portfolio needs and client requirements in the production of effective illustrations.
- Develop a personal approach to a variety of illustration challenges through self-reflection and an awareness of personal capabilities.
- Define stakeholder and audience needs as related to the project.
- Create timelines that identify project milestones and deadlines based on intended project objectives.

I also offered an extension of what I thought I could confidently offer them as an instructor though highlighted that these things were not mandatory for inclusion:

- Learn how to support our work with research
- Learn how to understand and fill gaps in our own knowledge when tackling a complex topic
- Think about how we integrate reference materials into our process
- Think about the nature of illustration as a dialogue with our audience
- Practice Communication Something Complicate
- "Take chances, Make Mistakes, Get Messy" (Frizzle. 1994)

The students were then guided through the process previously outlined, generating ideas, discussing and voting. See figure 1 for the results.

Figure 1 →

① → The entire board generated in response to this question after grouping, voting, and discussion on the subject.

② through ⑧ → close-up images of each thematic group. Themes highlighted here include: info viz, concept (concept art), science, professional skills related to both process and presenting work, research and using references, and clusters of topics that fall somewhere in between. Around each group, the arrows are meant to connect topics that might share skill sets or where there might be overlap in the kinds of information they entail. For example, concept art and science have a cluster between them reflecting topics that contain elements of both areas, such as environmental design or creature design, where a basis in anatomical knowledge might better drive the development of a concept.

2.2 WHAT KINDS OF THINGS DO YOU WANT TO MAKE?

This question was used to develop the assignments that would make up the course over the semester. To guide their thoughts, I provided a rough outline of the scale of assignments they should consider and loose timelines that should reflect this. The provided guidance:

Over the course of the term, we're going to aim to do three major assignments. These we'll define together, but should follow this general principle:

- A short assignment, 2ish weeks
- A large assignment, 5–6ish weeks
- A medium assignment, 3–4ish weeks

This would be paired with weekly self reflective journals centred on their learning and areas they were finding challenging. The students were then guided through the process previously outlined, generating ideas, discussing and voting. See figure 2 for the results.

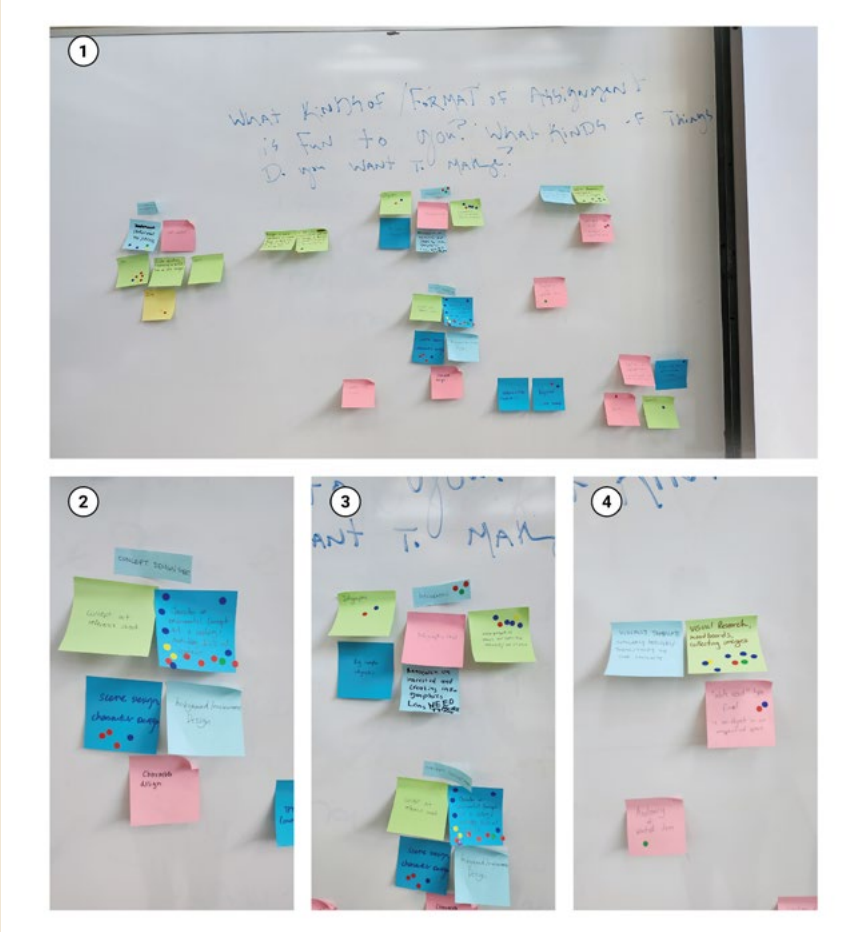

Figure 2 →

① → The entire board generated in response to this question after grouping, voting, and discussion on the subject.

②, ③, and ④ → close-up images of each thematic group. Students showed interest in three distinct themes: reference sheets like you might see in concept art, infographics, and visual research. Students also expressed an interest in zine-style projects, sequential narrative, projects with several required iterations, and a self-directed, low stress semester.

The workshop facilitation used the entirety of our three hour class time in the first week of the semester. Between classes, I took the output of both generative exercises and created a proposal for both the course outline and assignments that would be voted on in class the following week. Both this and the previous exercise together generated our road map for the semester.

3. Output

When examining the question "What do you want to learn?" a triad of three main areas of interest emerged—Information Visualization, Science Communications, and Concept Art. Based on my own experience having worked as an illustrator, designer, and scientist over the last 15 years, I felt these three areas of interest shared a core set of skills. I generated a list of what those might be (figure 3) and used this to inform a set of learning outcomes. Due to time constraints, this list of skills wasn't deeply validated, though colleagues working in the gaming industry graciously provided a quick consultation.

Figure 3 →
The list of skills shared between the three thematic areas. This slide was shown to the students and discussed as part of the validation process. Students agreed that this would be a useful suite of skills to build.

Lectures would weave the items in the centre of the triangle on figure 4 through these three major topic areas, and assignments. To maintain transparency students were walked through the process of analyzing the boards we generated in class together and were provided with an opportunity to discuss these conclusions. The following set of learning outcomes was collaboratively generated through this exercise:

By the end of this course, you should be able to:

- Assess gaps in your knowledge
- Conduct visual research
- Document and manage your visual research
- Plan a complex piece of visual work
- Understand your own process and ways of working that suit you
- Think about creative work in a professional or team based context
- Understand your audience and the context in which they will engage with your work
- Use visualization to support a thesis statement or argument; build your skills as a communications designer
- Get good at asking questions
- Work on our storytelling skills

We then took a vote as to whether or not we collectively wanted to adopt this set of learning outcomes for our course, requiring half the class to vote "yes" to proceed.

The final question, "What kinds of things do you want to make?" influenced the design of three major projects following the originally proposed scaffolding of a small scale project, a large project, and a mid–sized project, each being completed over the course of the semester. This exercise resulted in a suite of 3 flexible assignments that connected back to the initial criteria, each scaffolding on the next (figure 4). The first focused on basic information gathering and dissemination, the second on using information to make a compelling statement, and the third on how to frame and talk about their work in a professional context. As previously mentioned, these assignments were paired with ongoing self reflection journals and an end of term reflection meeting where we'd discuss the semester overall and their progress.

Figure 4 →
The three scaffolding assignments that made up the bulk of the course work. “Teach as Something” leading into “Make an Argument”, and finally ending off the term with “Telling a Story (About Your Work).

4. Limitations

There are a few limitations to this case study and in the process itself that are important to acknowledge. At the outset, the variability of institutional rules when it comes to changing a course syllabus makes it difficult to assess how replicable or scalable a practice like this might be in other contexts. I was fortunate to try this in a course structured to have a lot of freedom and with mechanisms in place to navigate change.

This was also a difficult practice for the students to engage in. The practice round of the co-design session had low participation and engagement; students did not readily voice their thoughts and ideas. This did improve with the subsequent questions, underscoring the importance of a practice round in a process like this. It was also largely a new way of thinking about their education; they hadn’t necessarily prepared for an exercise like this coming into the first week of the term, and in some cases weren’t used to the level of self reflection and interrogation this process required of them. In future, I would preface an exercise like this with some pre-class thought starters. Trust was also low; the students hadn’t experienced an approach like this before and were skeptical about how much influence they would truly have on their semester. This can’t necessarily be mitigated upfront and will need to be earned on the instructor’s part over the course of the term.

Finally, I was unable to conduct an exit survey on how this process worked on the student side. This means the reflections presented in this proceeding are largely my own. This reflects a gap in this case study. I would hesitate to claim this process as one completely grounded in dialogue until the learner perspective can be better integrated into a retrospective like this. I believe there is still value in the methods described here; however, a degree of future validation would lend more confidence to the materials presented.

5. Conclusions

The lack of exit surveying and student feedback makes it difficult to draw definitive conclusions about the overall impact this approach had on the students' experience; however, there are still some notable observations to be made both about the course and the experience of teaching in this way. Looking at the work produced for the class, the students did some excellent work over the semester. Projects went in a wide variety of directions and media, meaning the assignments were flexible enough to allow exploration around a core set of skills. Students often appeared to be quite excited when discussing their projects, often the chosen topic would be something important to them, and so their motivation was largely quite high. They also felt empowered to try new ways of working and focus on specific skills they wanted to build. At the start of the second and third projects in this course, most students proposed a project that in some way deviated from the assignment guidelines and felt comfortable navigating a discussion about what they'd like to do. From the instructor's point of view, the work I received as submissions in this course was generally more enjoyable to grade than usual; the students' enthusiasm for the work showed, and most submissions were thoughtful and enjoyable to spend time with.

On the other hand, the course went in some unexpected directions, which, from the perspective of setting out to make a course in collaboration with the students, is fantastic; however, some of these directions fell outside of my area of expertise. In order to deliver a course that truly met the agreement made at the start of the term, I had to do more research and consultation than I normally would in preparing this course. One notable example was the student's interest in concept art. This is a field I have no real experience in, so to really provide some of the learning the students were interested in, consultation with professionals working in the industry was necessary. The overall workload in running this course week to week was higher than it tends to be in a course delivered under the more traditional banking model.

When considering these reflections against the questions that drove this approach to course design, broadly, it achieved what it set out to do. Students were more motivated and invested in the work; they were vocal participants in lectures and in class activities, and over the course of the semester developed more confidence in pushing into new techniques, media, and ways of working. What particularly

stands out is that towards the end of the course, students frequently would assess a gap in their portfolio and ask about creating a piece of work they felt reflected that gap as part of their assignment. This points to a shift in their thinking about their work and the direction they want it to take them in, as well as confidence in discussing deviating from set assignment requirements; they trusted that this discussion would happen in good faith and that there would be an openness to their own goals. With this in mind, I feel that to some degree this approach was successful in challenging the banking model of education and engaging in a more dialectical relationship in the classroom. On the other hand, while there are indications that the students' metacognitive skills may have developed over the course of the semester, it is difficult to attribute that to the course alone. I would hypothesize that the self reflection built into those first weeks of class and over the semester through the journaling assignment encouraged the development of these skills, but I cannot say the extent to which they had an impact, if any. What's presented here is simply a reflection on an approach to teaching rather than the result of structured research; An approach like this may benefit from more formal investigation and measurement.

There is potential for co-design approaches to course design to become a useful tool in the training of thoughtful and reflective creative practitioners who have a clear point of view and strong voice. The method described here may not be the best possible implementation of these ideas, but it preliminarily points to it being a beneficial approach for both instructors and learners. As the world we work in changes, the skills emerging creatives need to thrive in their careers are going to change along with it. So too should our approach in the classroom. As instructors, we need to be able to both meet the students where they are and meet the moment in time we're teaching in. Helping learners build the skills they need to navigate uncertainty and change in their careers will only benefit creative professions.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I must acknowledge how influential the work of Paulo Freire was on this approach. I had read Pedagogy of the Oppressed the semester before running this co-design session with my students, and it had put the question of dialectical relationships in the classroom at the forefront of my approach. While not directly referenced here, I need to also note the work of Jesse Stommel; his writing has been very influential on my practice as an educator and certainly has influenced the decision to try this approach. I would also like to acknowledge the Sheridan College Tech/Sci Illustration class of 2014 for their contributions to the design of this course. Their perspective on the work of a concept artist was an incredibly valuable addition to the development of both the course syllabus and the course content itself. As well as my colleagues at Sheridan College in the Illustration program, who are leaning into helping our students build these very critical self reflective skills and maintaining an ongoing discussion about our role in an uncertain future. Finally, I would like to thank Michael Corirn and Jodie Jenkinson at the University of Toronto for showing me the kind of instructor I wanted to be.

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STORY, MEDIA AND CO-DESIGN •
04

Design educators are increasingly teaching within and about media environments that shape how students interpret the world, construct meaning, and communicate change. This section focuses on story and media as both content and process, highlighting how narrative, synthesis, and visual systems can support learning that is critical, reflective, and generative.

The contributions document student-centered explorations of sensemaking and storytelling: one offers a structured reflection on how affinity mapping supported a self-directed design project, while the other considers how visual narratives can be used to reimagine what "the news" might look like. Together, these pieces emphasize translation—between research and insight, between information and narrative, between process and artifact. In a ShiftShaping context, they also point to a broader pedagogical shift: moving from teaching students to "deliver outcomes" toward supporting them to build frameworks for meaning, make choices with intention, and understand how media forms influence what audiences believe is possible.

A Structured Reflection

on a Student Case Study of Affinity Mapping in a Self-Directed Toy Design Project

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LINK TO TALK ↗

ABSTRACT

Design education has increasingly required students to engage with research methods that extend beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries. As contemporary design briefs in education grow more complex, student designers are often required to distill large volumes of research. This extended reflection examines the use of affinity mapping (KJ Method or KJ Diagram) as an interdisciplinary research method and tool within the broader scope of a self-directed toy design project. The educational context is provided through a case study by Greg Gulyas, a Bachelor of Design student at Conestoga College, and is expanded upon by Rupsha Mutsuddi to provide greater insights, as student designers must synthesize varied research into actionable requirements (Rogers, 2019). The project developed an interactive toy prototype for millennial parents and children aged two years and older, drawing from thorough research on toy design and accessibility, child development, and market precedents (Grover & Clarke-Sather, 2018; Yamada-Rice, 2018). Affinity mapping was used to turn complex inputs into viable themes and concrete design requirements that focused on visual simplicity, inclusive interaction, open-ended play, and ultimately directly shaped the process of prototyping and material exploration. Throughout this paper, reflective insight is presented through detailed descriptions of how the affinity mapping method was used across multiple research phases to reshape research inputs, increase confidence, provide guidance, manage complexity, navigate failure, and support iterative workflows.

KEYWORDS

Design education
3D design
Industrial design
Interdisciplinary research
Design research

AUTHOR BIOS

Greg Gulyas is a Bachelor of Design Student at Conestoga College, whose research and creative interests lie at the intersections of design theory, user experience, and interdisciplinary methods. His work emphasizes integrating reflective practice with research or data-driven processes to develop creative design solutions and to solve real-world problems. Author duties included drafting and editing the manuscript and development of the case study.

Rupsha Mutsuddi is a Doctoral Researcher at the School of Global Health at York University and a Professor in the Bachelor of Design Program at Conestoga College. Rupsha's research is focused on improving well-being for people living with dementia using participatory design methods. The doctoral research is supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, Connected Minds Canada First Research Fund, and the Dahdaleh School of Global Health Research. Rupsha is also a design researcher at the Social and Technological Systems (SaTS) Lab based at York University. Author duties included drafting parts of the manuscript, editing the manuscript, and supervising the first author in a studio course.

Background and Interdisciplinary Roots of Affinity Mapping

The relationship between design, creativity, and transdisciplinarity can lead to outcomes such as innovative product designs and design artifacts which have the potential to enact large-scale social change (Klein, 2017; Pater, 2021). Design as a transdisciplinary and creative modality has led designers to engage with seemingly disparate disciplines such as healthcare, engineering, and psychology (Meija et al., 2023). Design research has emerged as a continuum of practices which contain discipline-specific explorations but can be complemented by research methodologies from other disciplines. Discipline-specific research methods have included typographic and material exploration within the field of design (Walker, 2017). Through the rise of experience-focused design, interdisciplinary research methods such as interviews, focus groups, and literature reviews have also been integrated into the practice and study of design (Lepley, 1998).

Design research has emerged as a continuum of practices which contain discipline-specific explorations but can be complemented by research methodologies from other disciplines.

Research has always been positioned as a key aspect of design practice and education (Faste & Faste, 2012). Often, the difference between disciplinary and interdisciplinary research is presented to students as a binary choice. In practice, when disciplinary and interdisciplinary methods are used together, they lead to a complete understanding of the design problem (Chou & Wong, 2015). Currently, at the undergraduate levels, there has been a lot of focus around disciplinary research methods through project-based learning. To improve their strategic position, students must be equipped with a holistic approach to conducting and understanding research.

This exploratory paper is used to explore the application of affinity mapping to a secondary research process that informed a self-directed project by Greg Gulyas, a Bachelor of Design student in an upper-level studio course at Conestoga College. Affinity Mapping, or the KJ method, first emerged in the context of sociology. It was used to analyze ethnographies, which is a qualitative method used to understand lived experiences through participant observation and interviews (Scupin, 1997). The method was originated by Professor Jiro Kawakita. While engaging with people from working class backgrounds in India and Nepal, Kawakita found diverse insights from interviews and observational data (Scupin, 1997). He sought to organize and understand the data through patterns. Kawakita's work

was influential in sociological contexts; however, it is now widely used in the context of user experience and service design research (Bielefeldt et al., 2012; Rukonic, Fastes, and Kieffer, 2024). Often this is in conjunction with primary research from usability interviews and focus groups to triangulate important insights (He & Peng, 2023). The method can also be used to conduct non-systematic literature reviews, which can be combined with user observations to create guidelines for practice (Abendschein, Desai, & Astell, 2023).

Affinity mapping was introduced to Bachelor of Design students in the Studio VI course, to fill several key gaps. The three major gaps that were the focus of this pedagogical exchange are as follows:

1. Helping students become more confident about their design decisions by connecting them to a structured research process
2. Disrupting students' tendencies to use artificial intelligence for problem definition and instead directing them towards a more critical and reflective approach, and
3. Helping students to manage information overload when they collect data from different sources. Affinity mapping also helped students to translate research into actionable design requirements, which could be operationalized and explored through disciplinary methods of material exploration and prototype creation. Greg's case study below is used to take a deeper look at this process

Case Study Written from Greg's Perspective as a BDes Student

2.1 CONTEXT AND GOALS

This subsection is used to outline the project's context and the goals established within it. Initially, the project began in a senior-level Studio VI course, in the Bachelor of Design program at Conestoga College. The initial project asked students to develop their own creative project for submission. This freedom enabled self-directed, open-ended exploration, offering many creative options and directions; the decision was made to focus on industrial design, specifically toy manufacturing within a Canadian demographic.

Framing the project was crucial, as it allowed for the development of an early, preliminary brief. The following categories were defined within the project brief, once a specified category was identified: design objectives, research scope (in phases), project specifications, writing components, design scope, target audience, problem statement, tone and voice, and final deliverables, including physical artifacts and digital components. Before research, the early framing of the brief established a clear problem statement: millennial parents and their young children need a toy that is safe, engaging, and educational while also offering long-term value and durability. The interactive toy prototype was designed to address these needs through age-appropriate play, durable materials, and an innovative learning or interactive component (Gulyas, 2025). The project targeted millennial parents, guardians, or caregivers as primary purchasers. Children aged 2–10 were defined as end users, prioritizing and emphasizing safety, engagement, educational value, and durability.

2.2 RESEARCH INPUTS BEFORE AFFINITY MAPPING

Before affinity mapping, I conducted a search of relevant sources of data. This spanned secondary and grey literature such as websites, professional insights from blogs, YouTube videos, and journals. This was complemented by market analysis, toy design research, and the gathering of historical materials, all documented across multiple research phases. The first research phase involved an audit of products available on the market at that time. A toy store was visited to collect in-store shelf data, which in turn helped highlight packaging design solutions and advertising practices. Historic toy designs were also explored. The inspiration was drawn from the readily available materials used by ancient humans. Across every epoch and culture, miniature versions representing human beings existed, often made from found environmental materials like various wood species, terra-cotta, metals, bone, and various plants or fibres (McMahon, 2025). An example is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1 →
Kachina dolls, carved by Native American Zuni artists.

Brooklyn Museum, New York, Museum Expedition 1903, Museum Collection Fund (03.325.4653) Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 (Generic)

Retrieved from Encyclopædia Britannica. (2026, January 28). Toy | Definition,

History, & Facts. [Image]. Encyclopedia Britannica. https://www.britannica.com/technology/toy#/media/1/601284/243717

While accessibility research is far more complex than simple data gathering through secondary sources, I also wanted to challenge the norm that more visually complex toys automatically support better interactions because they have more features. Contrary to the view that toys with simple, uncluttered visual designs facilitate richer exchanges between parents and children compared to those that favour complex or busy designs (Rogers, 2019), incorporating parental participation in play emerged as a critical research insight. This had to be done while balancing simplicity and complexity within the final prototype, as an overly simplistic design could lead to disengagement. The design also had to facilitate cognitive imagination, freedom, and creative contributions from parents and children to make play more meaningful. This shared engagement contributes to toy longevity not only from a sustainability standpoint, but also through repeat use and the creation of long-term sentimental value.

Notably, research on child development, with specific sources aligned with Jean Piaget's theory at the tail end of the sensorimotor stage (aged two) and for the preoperational stage between two and seven years of age, was identified to finalize the target audience and to inform design decisions (Ginsburg & Opper, 1988; Piaget, 1952). Language, symbolic thinking, and play further developed or emerged during the preoperational stages and this specific moment in child development was used to highlight design decisions in the final prototype (Ginsburg & Opper, 1988; Piaget, 1952). Research that examined children's ability to distinguish between aloneness, loneliness, and solitude was used to gain deeper insight into potential gender-based differences in early social and emotional experience. In a study conducted at the University of Athens in Greece, Galanaki found that girls were more likely than boys to report feeling lonely, as indicated by an 'often' or 'sometimes' rating, across all grade levels evaluated (Galanaki, 2004). These findings helped inform later deliverables. In another research example, a toy known as Avaki, analyzed by Yamada-Rice (2018), underlined driven storylines. Yamada-Rice demonstrated how physical and technological features can foster emotional narratives and generate non-digital sociodramatic play. The study highlighted how the toy's predefined motions, sounds, vibrations, pulses, and simplified physical form guided children's play toward emotionally driven storylines (Yamada-Rice, 2018). Alongside this, children's communication practices with Avaki differed from those associated with screen-based technologies, as play extended into supplementary activities such as drawing and writing to further reinforce mediated forms of interactions (Yamada-Rice, 2018).

2.3 HITTING RESEARCH OVERLOAD

By the final research phase, inputs had already become overwhelming: multiple pages on secondary accessibility research, various toy case studies, historical information, and market examples had generated vast amounts of information. This created information overload and required an organizing process. Affinity mapping presented the solution needed to organize and analyze the data. Early mapping was done with physically sticky notes, followed by revisiting the data through highlighting and compiling information from the various documents. The rough physical sticky note method was then turned into a final digital affinity map, as shown in Figure 2. The research was clustered into four categories: UI and design, industrial design process, market, and secondary research, as the key components needed to move into

the prototyping phases.

2.4 BUILDING THE AFFINITY MAP

Reviewing all the material, piece by piece, I wrote down key sections that stood out to me. Each note captured a single idea, constraint, or something that would require constant awareness and consideration, for example, emphasizing empathy and maintaining simplicity. Key insights, such as market considerations and the level of saturation, as well as guidelines on materials, practicality, and safety, helped keep things at a high level. At this stage, I avoided pre-sorting and theme development focusing on the collection of 22 smaller sticky notes. I digitized the notes in Miro, in order to colour-code and group my sticky notes to form themes. Ultimately, I arrived at the four themes shown in Figure 2. Themes emerged through refinements and iterations, including title changes. I prioritized looking for similar patterns to form my thematic groups.

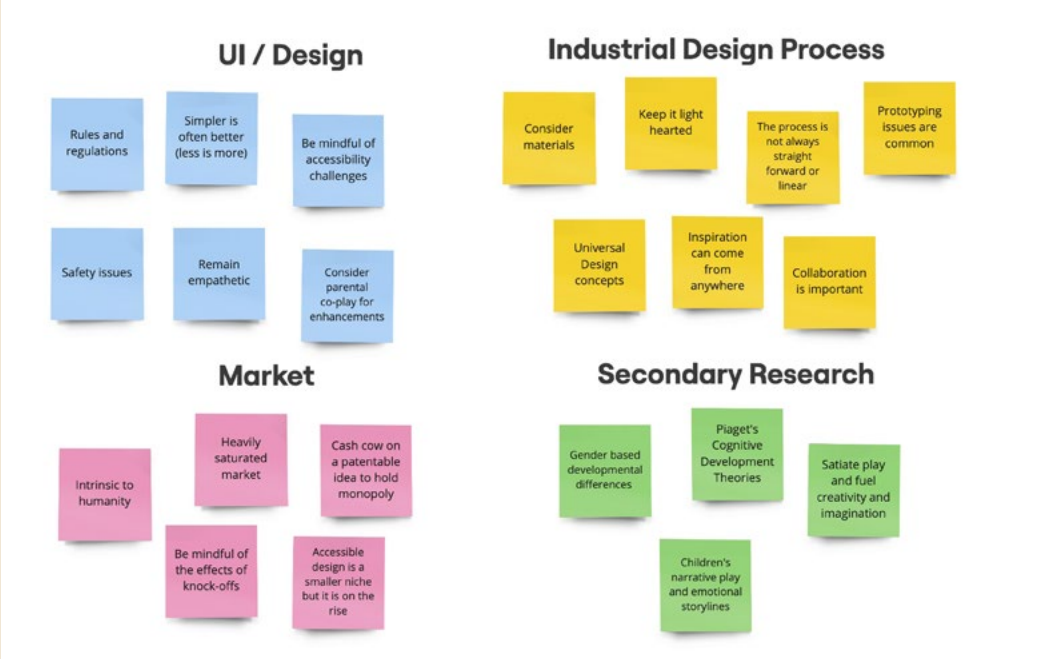

Figure 2 →
Created by Greg Gulyas (2025).

THEME 1: UI/UX REQUIREMENTS

The UI and design theme foregrounded safety, such as vigilance of small, swallowable components/parts or items that could pose a choking hazard or serious risk if broken. This category stressed awareness of accessibility needs. I wanted to stay mindful of the fact that children come from various backgrounds. However, I also knew that accessibility needs would have to be improved through future user testing and consultations with end users and parents. The user experience of the toys was also underlined by the research findings, specifically how toy features facilitated play between parents and children to create shared, meaningful experiences.

THEME 2: INDUSTRIAL DESIGN

The industrial design process category emphasized various inspirational aspects to consider before prototyping. This included universal design concepts that grounded design decisions in simplicity, such as colours, shapes, and forms. The theme also emphasized the need to prioritize durability to ensure that the toy could endure everyday wear and tear.

THEME 3: MARKET

The market category exemplified the positioning of the toy design being situated in a saturated market. This insight, in particular, had implications for the packaging design of the product. The market category also helped define the need for clear product differentiation to maximize the unique value added by the product. This created a realistic sense of how sustainable products occupy a small but growing niche. In reference to the market saturation of toys, I knew I needed to create attractive products for the younger target audience that utilize bright colours. The design also had to be mindful of the product window, construction materials, and how the product would sit on shelves. I remained focused on how the toy could intersect with child–parent co–play and how parents might react to the product being a secondary target audience, many of which are directly reflected in the final packaging design, as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3 →
Created by Greg Gulyas (2025). Final renders and a fully packaged display product demonstration.

THEME 4: MISCELLANEOUS SECONDARY RESEARCH

Lastly, the secondary research category distilled the more conceptual literature into a compact set of anchors. Gender-based development differences and Piaget's cognitive development stages informed the target audience's age range and the overall design of the product. These insights gave rise to the other two prototypes. The work presented on children's play with the Avaki doll by Yamada-Rice (2018) demonstrated the availability and spontaneity of narrative play, emotional storylines, and additional spontaneous activities.

Finalizing the Affinity Map

Once the affinity map was finalized, the goals of satiating play, supporting open-ended storytelling, sharing imaginative scenarios, and enabling co-play became core to the design to encourage creativity among children, caregivers, and diverse users. A set of three prototypes was finalized after recognizing the criticality of having multiple prototypes to support co-play between adults and children.

DISCUSSION: KEY INSIGHTS AND LESSONS LEARNED

Engaging in Affinity mapping resulted in the following key insights:

1. Affinity mapping made an overwhelming body of research manageable, distilling many disparate findings into a smaller set of themes so the design could remain critically aligned with the evidence rather than get lost in detail.
2. Returning to the research phases, which involved translating key points into sticky-note clusters, shifted the project's direction by turning those notes into visible, specific, persistent prompts that guided decisions throughout prototyping. Without the KJ Method, many of those overarching insights would likely have remained vague, underused, or, consequently, forgotten.
3. For similarly complex projects, affinity mapping could serve as a methodological bridge between research inputs and design requirements. This can both be used to organize thinking and noticeably increase student designers' confidence in their process and choices.
4. Digital tools were used for the affinity map, which offered many complements to traditional methods of physical sticky notes, such as the ability to compile and find themes through pattern searching. It also included the ability to move sticky notes more easily, rewrite themes or titles afterward, and organize more rapidly.

Project Tools and Project Replication

Monday.com was used to develop a workback schedule, and Miro, another web-based platform, was used to establish a project timeline (Gantt chart), mind mapping, and the affinity diagram. Adobe InDesign was used to organize content, gather data, write, analyze, and document all processes for this project in a designed process book. 3D software was used to help develop both the prototype and the packaging; specifically, Blender was used throughout the project. 3D components were intentionally included in the project deliverables from the very beginning to help develop software skills and possibly develop differentiating skills. Material exploration was necessary not only for sustainability and practical design but also to consider prototyping phases and deliver a high-level final prototype. Material exploration proved integral to this project and the development of

the prototype. A Sermoon V1 Pro 3D printer by Creality, which uses fused deposition modelling (FDM), was used to print the final three prototypes with basic white polylactic acid (PLA) filament. An air-compressed paintbrush was used to paint a physically produced prototype/model.

Results, Insights and Reflections from a Student Perspective

Working on this project changed my understanding of both research and design. Earlier in my undergraduate degree, I would often use a lot of research inputs across various projects. This project highlighted the significance of distilling information to move forward. Up until this specific project, running into too many research inputs was never a concern. Thankfully, affinity mapping turned a pile of dense resources mined from research into a tangible tool that could keep the project flowing. It served as a cornerstone that could be returned to at a moment's notice, especially when considering different design decisions. In this specific case study, the overload of research forced me to see research in a way I had not before: it requires active organization, the ability to analyze multiple inputs, and the ability to then translate into design directions. Research played an integral role due to the utilization of the affinity mapping process. Through the mapping process, I was able to find relationships I might have otherwise missed if the sources had stayed at the level of a thick stack of notes and articles. Seeing findings related to user experience from secondary sources, market pressures, and play-psychology insights sitting together on a digital board reinforced places of intersection and deviation. For example, there was tension between insights from research about simplicity facilitating co-play and market saturation research, which suggested the use of bold elements for impact. This tension led me to consider different design directions in my exploration. Visualizing the data with sticky notes made trade-offs easier to navigate and balance to inform my design.

Simultaneously, it was not a magic solution. Affinity mapping did not tell me exactly what to do next; it only offered guidance for decision-making when roadblocks occurred, making those choices more frictionless and easier to navigate. Suffice it to say, it did not always feel like the right design choices were made, nor did it give me complete reassurance. It did, however, give me more confidence from these informed decisions, as without it, I would have been designing irrationally. I still, of course, needed feedback from my instructor, peers, and my own material exploration to judge whether the requirements and goals were realistic. I also knew that in reality, I would need to consult end users and parents. However, in the scope of the course, I focused on secondary research, feedback from my instructor and peers, and my own point of view to navigate design decisions. Outlined below are Figures 4 to 7, which demonstrate the stages of the prototypes' evolution and the reliance on materials found within my direct environment, an inspirational method used from researching historic toy examples such as the Kachina dolls and direct inspiration from how children might play with simple loose parts.

Figure 4 →

Created by Greg Gulyas (2025). Alpha Prototype Gert: a character form derived from loose parts, made of pipe cleaners and plastic googly eyes.

Figure 5 →
Created by Greg Gulyas (2025). Beta Prototype Gert: a character's evolved form made from coloured clay.

Figure 6 →
Created by Greg Gulyas (2025). Beta Prototype Plim: a character's evolved form made from coloured clay.

Figure 7 →
Created by Greg Gulyas (2025). Beta Prototype: a character's evolved form made from coloured clay.

Additional characters were added due to the research on children's experiences of aloneness, loneliness, and solitude, as well as key insights on co-play. This shifted the project scope to include more character deliverables than originally expected, making the physical 3D printing limited to one fully painted model, as a single toy could take around three to five hours to print to scale. Furthermore, I created a set of characters that could better facilitate parent-child co-play and imagination, as there are more characters to share and attach symbolic meaning to, leading to a richer imaginative play experience. This decision to include these characters was supported by the research. In a sense, the affinity mapping method worked best as a bridge between research, critique, and decisions, not as a replacement for either. After this evolution and character development, these toy designs were brought into a powerful 3D creation suite, such as Blender. Simple shapes were used to replicate the designs of clay models, starting with limbs, which were then joined and pieced together. Over time, I experimented with more anthropomorphic, humanlike forms for the hands and feet. This made

the final prototypes feel relatable but discernibly different from one another. Furthermore, the packaging design and the characters also underwent simultaneous development as shown in Figures 8 to 10.

Figure 8 →
Created by Greg Gulyas (2025). Final Prototype Stages: An extremely rough character model was created digitally in Blender.

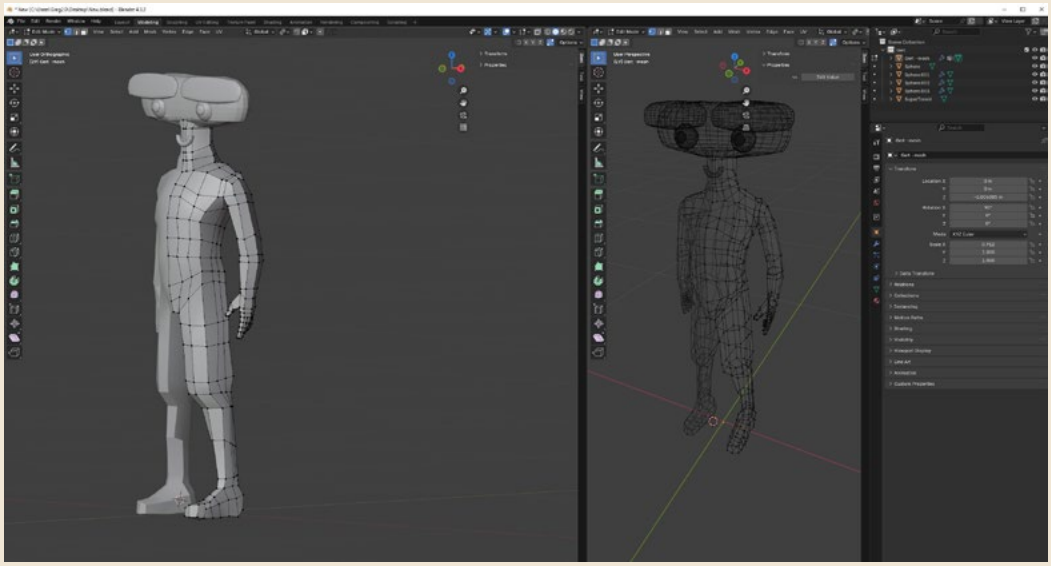

Figure 9 →
Created by Greg Gulyas (2025). Final Prototype Stages: A character model evolved and created digitally in Blender.

Figure 10 →
Created by Greg Gulyas (2025). Final Prototype Stages: A packaging style was explored and created digitally in Blender.

The effect on my confidence and clarity was more noticeable over time. Before mapping, it felt as if every new source conflicted; however, after mapping, the information that was gained allowed me to remain focused on simple shapes and colours. The shift from feeling pulled around by research to feeling like there was a pathway to navigate made it easier to finally commit to directions, even when the materials and prints inevitably failed, as shown in Figure 11.

Figure 11 →
Created by Greg Gulyas (2025). Final Prototype Stages: A failed print.

Conclusion and Future Directions

If I were to do this project again, I would change several things. The initial waves of research were thorough, but I now see that I could have benefited from using affinity mapping at each of the three research phases instead of waiting until the point of overwhelm. In this project, I admittedly waited until late, which meant that mapping was partly a rescue operation and was done so in haste. Spending more time on both constructing and evaluating the affinity map earlier on may also have given me more confidence in the long run when making decisions. I would also reconsider how I handled the themes themselves. Constructing multiple affinity maps in succession in an iterative approach was not explored, in and of itself. Notably, how disciplined or conservative the number of themes in the affinity map was, by diluting the themes even more, or perhaps, versus a more explored or expanded affinity map, was a direction left completely unexplored. The affinity map was used only twice, once in a physical sticky note format and later directly translated into a digital format for easier utilization and storage. The physical affinity map was no different from the digital version, and perhaps taking the opportunity to explore or use the tool on multiple occasions could have resulted in more apt findings and anchors.

Finally, implementing a deliberate cross-checking tool or mechanism between the affinity map and the decisions made during my prototype's creation could have provided great value or insight. For example, the tool could look at the affinity map and the decisions made along the way by annotating sketches, offering reminders, or models quickly with the specific themes they respond to, as, in hindsight, the decisions themselves, in response to the affinity map, were not as clear to me then, in the moment, as they are now. Exploring a more adaptive, iterated use of affinity mapping in future projects could therefore provide even stronger insight into how research, mapping, and design decisions interact. Investigating primary research for this project, particularly through a qualitative method or lens, involving observational studies of parental and children's play, would have greatly impacted this project.

Figure 12 →
Created by Greg Gulyas (2025).
Final Prototype for Plim

Limitations and Transferability

This case study is narrow in scope; however, it remains transparent, and it should be noted that it has several limitations that shape the extent to which its insights can be applied. It documents the experience of a single undergraduate design student working on a self-directed toy design project within a specific studio course, using affinity mapping as a central organizing tool. The work did not include formal user testing with children or parents, interviews, surveys, longitudinal evaluation of play, comparisons, cross-references, cross-sectional studies using alternative research

methods and metrics, or any self-conducted primary research, for that matter. As a result, the insights offered here are intended solely for the purposes of my own exploration and education and to demonstrate a single case study in which affinity mapping helped with a design project. The results can be transferable to similar studio contexts where students may face similar challenges, such as large self-assembled bodies of research and the need to translate data or inputs into design requirements under time constraints. In elaboration, even so, the projects and topics on overload, structuring research, and using visual clustering to support decision-making covered within this paper, are likely relevant to other research-heavy projects, especially those dealing with secondary accessibility research, sustainability, or universal design, as well as to complex briefs—applicability remains.

Conclusion

As demonstrated by Greg's detailed case study, affinity mapping can be a useful tool for students to make sense of different types of complex secondary data. As an educator, when shared with students, it has three key benefits. First, it helped students manage large amounts of information and use a more critical approach to determining their design decisions. Second, it allowed students to feel more confident about their designs. Lastly, it gave students a visual tool to make connections and form their own interpretation of the research. This is in contrast to instances where students simply have found research to support their conclusions rather than engaging with the research to find novel, evidence-based information to guide their creation processes. Going forward, affinity mapping has the potential to be a structured introductory research method for undergraduate design students to utilize in their practice.

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What If the News Looked Like This?

A student exploration of visual narratives

XIAOJUN HUANG

LINK TO TALK ↗

ABSTRACT

This presentation reports on a 16-week classroom experiment in which students used news headlines and articles as source material for AI-generated imagery. Students independently developed methods for translating text into visual form, positioning AI tools as both medium and collaborator. The project extended beyond technical skill-building to interrogate authorship, representation, and affect. Can an algorithm meaningfully convey urgency, tragedy, or hope embedded in journalistic language? Where does authorship reside: in the human prompt writer, the machine learning system, or the originating news source? Through iterative production and critical reflection, students examined the tensions between creative agency and algorithmic automation, confronting the ethical and conceptual responsibilities of image-making in an AI-mediated media landscape.

KEYWORDS

Visual storytelling
Artificial intelligence
Reflective learning

AUTHOR BIO

Xiaojun Huang is a Toledo-based designer and educator whose practice engages cultural semiotics, typographic experimentation, and exhibition systems. Working between Eastern and Western visual traditions, she examines cultural hybridity as both structure and tension, using typography and spatial frameworks to question inherited visual norms. Her projects operate at the intersection of form, language, and environment, constructing systems that invite interpretation and critical reflection.

As an educator at Bowling Green State University, she emphasizes process-driven inquiry, multi-sensory exploration, and rigorous hands-on experimentation. Her pedagogy foregrounds making as a mode of thinking, guiding students from conceptual research through material execution. Huang received her BFA in Book Arts from Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts and her MFA in 2D Design from Cranbrook Academy of Art.

Introduction

We live in an era where information is everywhere. It is easy to access, easy to share, and impossible to ignore. Daily life is saturated with data: apps, websites, and mobile devices track what we want, show us what we want to see, and even force-feed what we don't. In this hyperconnected information age, how might designers treat information itself as a medium for experimentation, generating new visual interpretations through collaboration with emerging technologies?

Many graduating students enter the professional field with both ambition and uncertainty. Alongside typical career anxieties, the rapid development of artificial intelligence is frequently discussed in news and social media and introduces additional questions about skill relevance and creative identity. In this project, I encourage students to approach these concerns through practice rather than avoidance, treating information as raw material for experimentation.

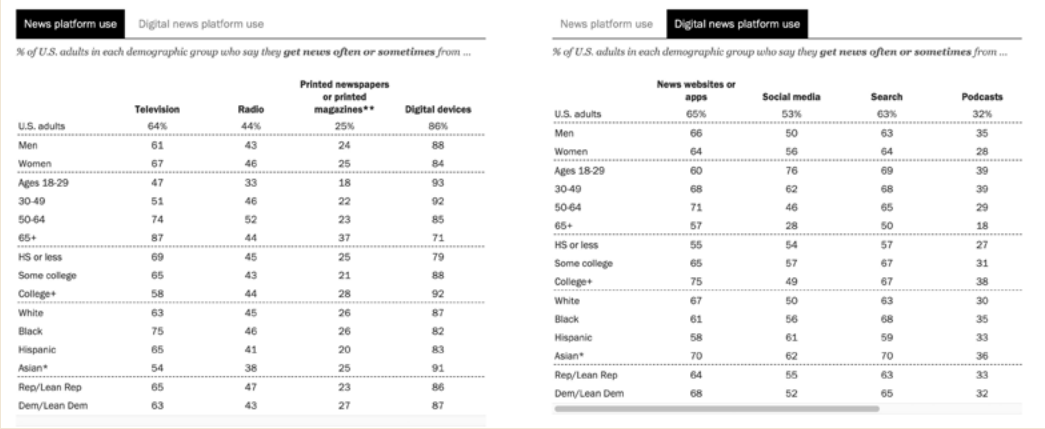
I use making smoothies as a metaphor: imagine all information as ingredients. Students take these raw materials and grind them in the "blender" of AI, deconstructing and transforming them into something new, sometimes surprising, sometimes imperfect, but always experimental. Over the sixteen weeks, students read weekly news and generate images based on headlines and context, sharing their creative "recipes" with the class.

Background

The course I am teaching is Collaborative + Community Engagement Practicum, emphasizes conceptual development, strategic thinking, and writing within the context of brand awareness and socially responsive design. Students are encouraged to collaborate with peers, communities, and technologies through observation, discussion, and production.

The AI × NEWS project situates current events as primary source material. Integrating news into the practicum reinforces the course's emphasis on critical engagement and contextual awareness. Regular interaction with journalistic content encourages students to interpret social issues thoughtfully while translating them into visual form.

According to the Pew Research Center, news consumption varies significantly by age and educational background (Figure 1). Younger adults with college experience are more likely to access news through digital platforms such as websites, apps, and social media, while older adults rely more heavily on television and print. Among U.S. adults aged 18–29, social media represents a primary news source, followed by websites, search engines, and television.



News platform use | Digital news platform use

*% of U.S. adults in each demographic group who say they **get news often or sometimes** from ...*

	Television	Radio	Printed newspapers or printed magazines**	Digital devices
U.S. adults	64%	44%	25%	86%
Men	61	43	24	88
Women	67	46	25	84
Ages 18-29	47	33	18	93
30-49	51	46	22	92
50-64	74	52	23	85
65+	87	44	37	71
HS or less	69	45	25	79
Some college	65	43	21	88
College+	58	44	28	92
White	63	45	26	87
Black	75	46	26	82
Hispanic	65	41	20	83
Asian*	54	38	25	91
Rep/Lean Rep	65	47	23	86
Dem/Lean Dem	63	43	27	87

News platform use | Digital news platform use

*% of U.S. adults in each demographic group who say they **get news often or sometimes** from ...*

	News websites or apps	Social media	Search	Podcasts
U.S. adults	65%	53%	63%	32%
Men	66	50	63	35
Women	64	56	64	28
Ages 18-29	60	76	69	39
30-49	68	62	68	39
50-64	71	46	65	29
65+	57	28	50	18
HS or less	55	54	57	27
Some college	65	57	67	31
College+	75	49	67	38
White	67	50	63	30
Black	61	56	68	35
Hispanic	58	61	59	33
Asian*	70	62	70	36
Rep/Lean Rep	64	55	63	33
Dem/Lean Dem	68	52	65	32

These patterns inform the structure of the assignment. By working within the formats students already encounter, mobile screens, social media feeds, and compact visual spaces, the project introduces practical constraints related to scale, composition, and attention span. These constraints shape the design challenge and support experimentation in contemporary visual storytelling.

Methodology: The AI × NEWS Project

For designers, awareness of current events strengthens cultural literacy and contextual sensitivity. At the same time, familiarity with emerging tools expands methodological flexibility. In this assignment, students were required to experiment with at least three AI platforms, not to master them but to compare their affordances and limitations.

The project involved 21 students working approximately 45–60 minutes per week for sixteen weeks. All images were standardized to 8 × 8 inches to maintain consistency. (Figure 2–4)

STEP 1

Students selected three headlines each week: one local, one regional, and one national or international story. They posted titles and links on a shared discussion board to encourage peer engagement.

STEP 2

Students produced visual interpretations of their selected headlines using a minimum of three AI-driven platforms. The emphasis was comparative experimentation: analyzing how different systems responded to similar prompts, how stylistic outputs diverged, and how platform-specific constraints shaped visual results.

STEP 3

In the final week, students submitted written reflections documenting their methodologies. Each reflection described at least three distinct strategies, such as modifying prompt structure, adjusting stylistic parameters, or combining outputs across platforms. The goal was critical evaluation, including articulated strengths and limitations of each approach, rather than descriptive summary.

Figure 2 →
Image generated by Joslyn Harrington (2025) for the AI × NEWS project. Based on the local news article "Water Main Break Floods Roadway in Bowling Green." Reflection Method 1, first-week generation.

Reflection #1

"For the first step in my process, I asked an AI (ChatGPT) to analyze the dominant emotions conveyed in each news article. I provided the AI with the article's title, publication date, and full content to ensure it had the necessary context. My creative decision to focus on emotional analysis stemmed from wanting to simplify complex, factual reporting into an emotional 'mood board' that could drive the next creative stages. The prompt I used was: "Analyze the dominant emotions presented in this article based on the headline, date, and content."

This approach helped filter dense information into an emotional tone, making it easier to design visual responses. However, this method came with conceptual risks. Emotional analysis can oversimplify journalism, which often strives to maintain balance, report facts, and present multiple viewpoints. By highlighting only emotions like fear, hope, or outrage, there is a chance of distorting the story's full meaning unintentionally. Ethically, this raised concerns about how AI might reinforce emotional biases rather than represent journalistic objectivity.

While emotional analysis made it easier to create mood-driven imagery, it also made me more aware of how AI can subtly shift the original intent of factual reporting. As a designer, I recognized the responsibility of critically evaluating AI outputs to ensure that important nuances are not lost when translating journalism into visual narratives."

Figure 3 →
Image generated by Joslyn Harrington (2025) for the AI × NEWS project. Based on the local news article "Falcon Marching Band shipping off to Dublin to perform in world's largest St. Patrick's Day parade." Reflection Method 2, Eighth-week

Reflection #2

In the second step, I asked the AI (ChatGPT) to create a poem based on the article's dominant emotions. The prompt I used was: "Write a poem based on this news article and the dominant emotions you identified." I aimed to enhance emotional resonance while introducing symbolic language to inspire the abstract image later.

Generating a poem allowed the AI to creatively reframe the news story, filtering feelings and key themes into lyrical and symbolic expressions. This helped me imagine more conceptual visual responses rather than focusing purely on literal imagery. However, a conceptual issue emerged from this process. Poetry inherently compresses, reinterprets, and sometimes even romanticizes real-world events. Important factual details—such as names, places, dates, or complexities—were minimized or entirely excluded in favor of emotional depth.

This step highlighted an ethical dilemma in AI-assisted visual storytelling. By using a poetic lens, the narrative shifts away from journalistic accuracy toward emotional dramatization. While this can make storytelling more visually impactful, it also risks altering public perception of the event. This made me realize that designers must strike a careful balance between creativity and factual responsibility when working with AI-generated interpretations.

Figure 4 →
Image generated by Joslyn Harrington (2025) for the AI × NEWS project. Based on the national news article "CNN Poll: Trump's approval at 100 days lower than any president in at least seven decades" Reflection Method 3, Fifthteen-week generation.

Reflection #3

For the third step, I asked the AI (ChatGPT) to generate an abstract or symbolic image based on the poem and the dominant emotional tones identified earlier. I built the final prompt carefully, focusing on mood, symbolism, and emotional color palettes rather than requesting a literal illustration of the article's content. The prompt was: "Create an 8×8 inch abstract or symbolic image that reflects the emotional tone and ideas of this poem."

This approach allowed the AI to produce expressive, textured imagery that captured the feeling of the article rather than its facts. From a creative perspective, this step helped translate intangible concepts into visual elements like color, form, and texture. However, from a conceptual standpoint, this method fully detached the visual output from the article's original factual information. Viewers encountering only the final image would likely have no way of understanding the full story without additional context.

This raises significant ethical concerns about using AI-generated art in visual storytelling, especially when tied to real-world news. Abstract images are powerful emotional tools, but can easily exclude important factual, historical, or social information. Through this experiment, I learned that while AI excels at creating mood-driven visuals, designers must remain aware of the narrative gaps that abstraction can create and think critically about how to bridge those gaps when necessary.

Beyond image production, the assignment encouraged critical thinking. Students became more aware of how headlines shape perception and how visual interpretation can shift meaning. They experimented with refining prompts to produce more precise or nuanced results. Through this process, they began to see how AI systems influence authorship and storytelling. As students wrote:

Analysis and Outcomes

After sixteen weeks of reading, experimenting, and generating AI-assisted imagery, the 21 students expressed mixed feelings about AI. Nine students (42.9%) described neutral attitudes, six (28.6%) shared negative experiences, and five (23.8%) reported positive impressions. Overall, the responses suggest curiosity, caution, and critical awareness rather than strong enthusiasm or rejection.

Throughout the semester, students documented sixty-three different working methods, combining various prompt-writing tools and image-generation platforms. There was no single dominant workflow. Instead, students moved between tools depending on the task, experimenting with different combinations.

Tools Used to Write Prompts (63 total uses):
19/63 ChatGPT, 11/63 Adobe Firefly, 6/63 DeepAI, 4/63 Google Gemini, 2/63 Meta AI, 2/63 FreePik, 2/63 Grok, 2/63 Bing Image Creator, 2/63 Canva AI, 1/63 Google Translator, 1/63 Pixlr, 1/63 Midjourney, 1/63 Vondy, 1/63 Copilot, 1/63 Microsoft Designer

Tools Used to Generate Images (63 total uses):
15/63 Adobe Firefly, 8/63 DeepAI, 7/63 Google Gemini, 6/63 ChatGPT, 5/63 FreePik, 3/63 Meta AI, 2/63 Bing Image Creator, 2/63 Canva AI, 1/63 Pixlr, 1/63 Midjourney, 1/63 Vondy, 1/63 Grok, 1/63 Copilot

Tools Used to Generate Images (63 total uses):
15/63 Adobe Firefly, 8/63 DeepAI, 7/63 Google Gemini, 6/63 ChatGPT, 5/63 FreePik, 3/63 Meta AI, 2/63 Bing Image Creator, 2/63 Canva AI, 1/63 Pixlr, 1/63 Midjourney, 1/63 Vondy, 1/63 Grok, 1/63 Copilot

In terms of creativity, many students were surprised by the visual range AI could produce. Platforms such as Firefly, Canva, and Meta AI generated abstract or surreal images that pushed students to interpret news in unexpected ways. Features like style transfer and inpainting allowed them to combine photography with illustration, creating playful or experimental results. As one student noted:

"This image generation can be used in newspapers and other visual articles to provide an easily digestible graphic for less serious and more fun news articles. It could engage the reader and make it a more wholesome read."

AI tools also supported speed and variation. Some platforms quickly generated multiple versions of an idea, which helped students compare outcomes and revise prompts efficiently. Others handled detailed or illustrative styles particularly well. One student reflected:

"DeepAI was able to utilize this prompt and make very cohesive, illustrative images that were detailed, even with such a simplistic prompt."

Beyond image production, the assignment encouraged critical thinking. Students became more aware of how headlines shape perception and how visual interpretation can shift meaning. They experimented with refining prompts to produce more precise or nuanced results. Through this process, they began to see how AI systems influence authorship and storytelling. As students wrote:

"Overall, this has been an interesting way to question how imagery and news are deeply related to our emotions and rational thought."

"This project helped me understand how design, technology, and storytelling are all deeply connected and how important it is to question the tools we use, not just for their creative output, but for their impact."

At the same time, students encountered clear limitations. Some platforms restricted certain topics, especially sensitive news stories. Results could be inconsistent, overly stylized, or visually distorted. Text within images was sometimes unreadable (Figure 5–6). Producing a satisfying image often required multiple rounds of prompt adjustments, which some students found frustrating. One student explained:

"There's too much potential for misrepresentation, especially when AI starts making assumptions about race, gender, age, or intent. Inaccurate visuals can do just as much harm as misinformation,"

"Gemini seems to have the most bias... They depict stereotypes... AI, like Google, will always be unaware of things and follow a big algorithm, which can make it create things that depict harmful stereotypes."

Taken together, the outcomes show that students did not simply accept or reject AI tools. Instead, they tested them, questioned them, and formed informed opinions based on direct experience.

Figure 5 →
Image generated by Jozlyn Burky (2025) for the AI × NEWS project. Based on the regional news article "Ohio university displays 'biological' sex bathroom signs in wake of new state law" Reflection Method 1, Seventh-week generation

The first method I went about using AI to generate the images was going to ChatGTP and asking it to write a micro fiction piece, about 100 words, about the article, then using FreePik to generate the image. Personally, I was not expecting anything great from this, since the idea of ChatGTP can only replicate what it is programmed to do, from people who are probably not as into the art or literary world as artists or authors.

The micro fiction that ChatGTP spat out, not surprisingly, was only stating a story, there was no kind of tension and thought behind the sentences, and it reminded me of someone who has started writing, where sentences are just a way to make ends meet, not so much a way to convey an expression. If you have studied the craft of fiction, you can identify that there is no connection between reader and story. The components that make up the piece all need to work together, not just look pretty strung together.

Since this methodology challenged two aspects of AI, both the visual storytelling and also the literary storytelling, it is very, very obvious that AI has a lot of room to grow—FreePik tends to put out very basic, sometimes stereotypical beliefs on particular words while ChatGTP lacks the emotion of the news articles, which can subsequently misinterpret the news article in the first place—but I do not encourage this, for the sake of the environment and its insults

to fiction writers and poets. The image generator seemingly tries to make up for the lack of emotion that ChatGTP lost, but its attempt to fill in the gaps sometimes turns the entire message of the original news article from happy to somber, ultimately making the photo less reliable. While visual art and literature seek representation and appreciation through acceptance and understanding, pushing the boundaries of creativity in ethical manners, AI is simply programmed to get fast results, regardless of who or what gets in the way.

Figure 6 →
Image generated by Bella Granfors (2025) for the AI × NEWS project. Based on the National/International article "UN convenes emergency session to address escalating Middle East conflic" Reflection Method 2, Second-week generation

In my opinion canva AI actually did one of the best! The results were incredibly good at creating what I was looking for as I was typing in surrealism art styles with the headlines. It was exactly how I would picture it. It even did good with realism and other aspects. I was particularly impressed with its ability to use symbolism such as clocks to signify ticking time in regards to life and death, and our time here on earth. The images would create four at a time and they were so interesting it was hard to even pick which one to use. All of them were so interesting. Though I will say, and this goes for all ai I have used. They cannot master type in any way, it is always morphed. There will always be some odd morphed thing. Also the odd uncanny addition of nude bodies in some of the stuff was a little creepy.

Discussion and Reflection

Can an algorithm capture urgency, tragedy, or hope? Potentially. But it requires strong human-centered direction to guide tone and context. Without that guidance, the results can feel hollow. Perhaps in the future these systems will better grasp emotional nuance. As of 2025, however, the technology remains uneven, and consistent outcomes are difficult to achieve.

When someone asks what AI can do, my students will not answer from speculation. They will answer from experience.

There is still a noticeable gap between platforms. Different "blenders" AI platforms produce very different textures. Some are powerful but overheat. Some are fast but shallow. Some are smooth but lack depth. The competition among AI generators reveals varying levels of development, sensitivity, and reliability.

In the United States, work generated solely by AI from prompts cannot be copyrighted because the machine, not the human, executes the core creative act. Even significant editing or rearranging of AI-generated imagery places authorship in a gray area. This legal ambiguity reinforces an important point: AI is a tool, not an author. The human role remains essential.

Does this practice infantilize my students or reduce them to button-pushers? No. I want them to try making a "smoothie." At least make one. Try different ingredients. Test different blenders. Do you need to be a professional smoothie maker to work in a coffee shop? No. Will smoothies always be the most popular drink? Maybe. Maybe the future favorite is boba. The point is not the drink. The point is learning through making. Making reduces fear. Making builds discernment.

When someone asks what AI can do, my students will not answer from speculation. They will answer from experience. They have tested the ingredients. They have compared the blenders. And most importantly, they understand that no machine replaces the human hand guiding the recipe.

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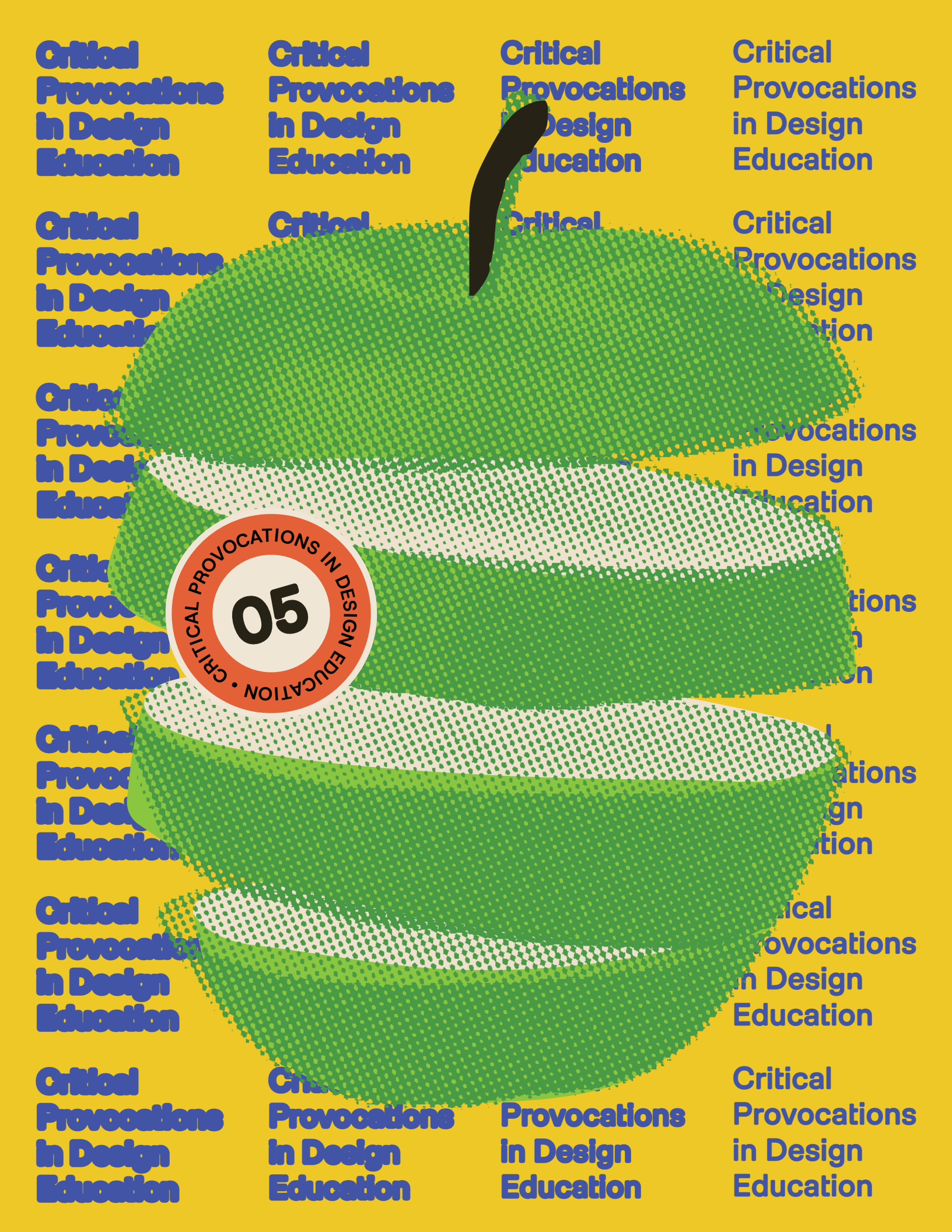
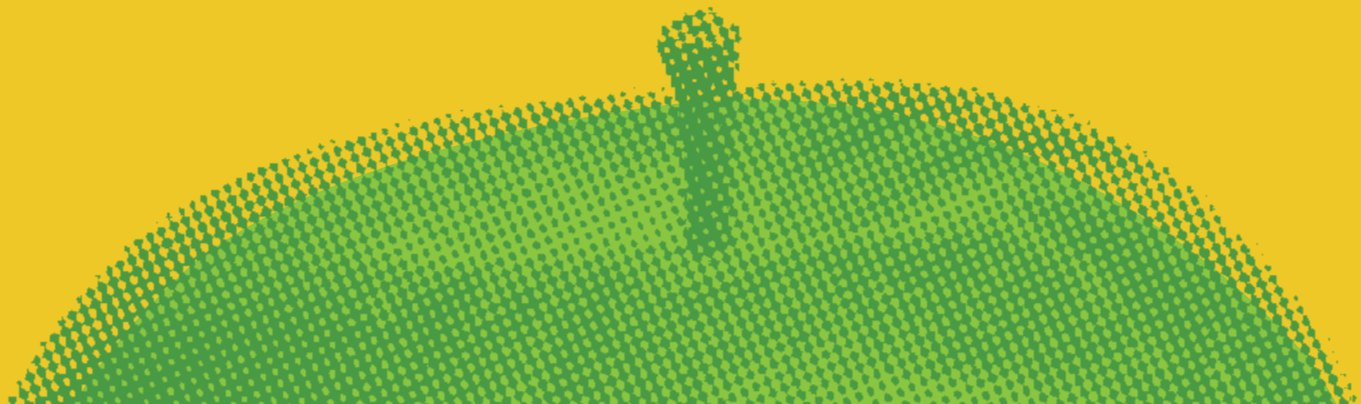

Critical Provocations in Design Education
CRITICAL PROVOCATIONS IN DESIGN EDUCATION • 05

The final section gathers contributions that use criticality as a teaching practice—one that tests assumptions, questions disciplinary boundaries, and expands what counts as design knowledge. In the language of ShiftShaping, provocation is not disruption for its own sake; it is a method for helping students and educators recognize inherited norms and consciously re-design them.

The pieces in this section approach provocation through multiple formats and scales: critical design as interrogation and pedagogy; an experiential, inclusive lab model that reframes learning through accessibility, mentorship, and practice; and a dialogic "in conversation" format that centers student and graduate perspectives on teaching and learning beyond the classroom. Read together, they show how critical provocation can live in curriculum, in studio culture, in institutional structures, and in the simple act of listening—creating space for education that is more responsive, more ethical, and more future-facing.



Is This Even Design?

Critical Design & Shift Shaping

AMY PIRIE-FORD

LINK TO TALK ↗

ABSTRACT

Shift shaping asks designers to imagine alternative futures and determine how to move toward them. Yet many educators and practitioners have grown dissatisfied with dominant design-thinking frameworks, arguing that their standardization can narrow the ethical scope of design. While design thinking offers valuable tools for problem framing and iteration, it often leads to solution-oriented outcomes and risks reframing structural injustices as technical challenges. This paper argues that critical design should be embedded alongside design thinking as a complementary pedagogical framework in undergraduate design education. Drawing on a semester-long studio course, the paper documents how critical design was introduced through speculative projects, structured critique, and interpretive analysis. Three student case studies illustrate how critical design can shift student work from affirmative solutions toward ethical inquiry and systemic critique. The paper outlines four scaffolding strategies: developing shared analytical language, embedding dialogic critique, normalizing ambiguity and failure, and aligning assessment with inquiry rather than resolution. Rather than positioning critical design as oppositional to design thinking, this paper proposes a parallel model in which design education moves from solving given problems toward questioning their underlying assumptions. In doing so, critical design contributes to shift-shaping by cultivating new ways of seeing and teaching students to see critically.

KEYWORDS

Design thinking
Critical design
Ethics
Design education
Design pedagogy

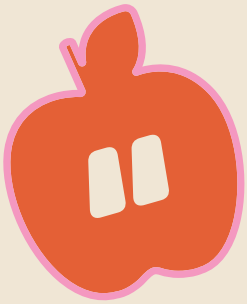
AUTHOR BIO

Amy Pirie-Ford is a designer and educator completing an MA in Digital Design and Communications and preparing for doctoral research in critical and immersive design. Her work explores the intersection of digital design, speculative practice, and social impact, with a focus on how design education can cultivate ethical reflection and systemic awareness.

Is This Even Design? Critical Design & Shift Shaping

Shift shaping asks us what our vision of the future looks like and then untangles how to get there. But how exactly do we do this? Design thinking has shown promise, but many designers now argue that it has limitations in addressing complex social and structural challenges. Senior lecturer and designer Darren Raven (2025) used his seminal digital design zine to highlight issues with design thinking, and so has Natasha Jen (2017) with her scathing video "Design Thinking is Bullsh*t." Studies by Cross (2011), Dorst (2010), and Tonkinwise (2015) argue that design thinking can oversimplify and narrow the diversity of design practice. Constanza-Chock (2020) argues that design thinking, emerging from elite Western institutions, is corporate in orientation and entrenches existing hegemonies by reframing structural injustice as a series of technical design challenges (235). Sarwar and Fraser (2019) contend that efforts to codify design thinking as a coherent, scientific method misunderstand both the nature of design practice and the standards required for legitimate knowledge production and Verganti et al. (2021) argue that we need to critically reflect on the nature and limits of design thinking.

As dissatisfaction with dominant design frameworks has grown amongst practitioners, researchers, and, of course, educators, alternative approaches have emerged seeking to address ethical, social, and environmental limitations. Kimball (2012) warns that affirmative models of design are insufficient to prepare students for the complex systems our futures will face. Tharp and Tharp (2018) advocate that educational institutions need to support speculative and critical design through new educational models. DiSalvo (2012) extends the ideas of critical design in education by situating them within a broader generative process and providing educators with additional tools for teaching it. So does critical design in education work? Orchard and O'Gorman (2024) tested this by introducing critical design into undergraduate programming and found that it is effective, even for audiences from different disciplinary backgrounds.



Critical design should be embedded alongside design thinking as a parallel and complementary framework, rather than as a supplementary afterthought.

Accordingly, this paper argues that critical design should be embedded alongside design thinking as a parallel and complementary framework, rather than as a supplementary afterthought. Critical design equips students to interrogate assumptions and to surface the social, political, and ethical dimensions of design practice. By documenting a classroom implementation and articulating concrete scaffolding strategies, this paper contributes a practical pedagogical model for integrating critical design into undergraduate curricula.

Background

Critical design is most commonly traced to the work of Dunne and Raby in the 1990s and early 2000s. However, their theories were situated within earlier movements and practices, notably the anti-design movement of the 1960s, which rejected functionalism and consumerism in favour of ambiguity and provocation. The rise of Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) reframed design as a problem-solving discipline centred on usability and system optimization (Malpass, 2014). While HCI formalized user-centred approaches, it also narrowed the critical and speculative capacities of design. Dunne and Raby responded to both the politicized experimentation of anti-design and the techno-cratic approach of HCI, repositioning design as a means of questioning. Critical design, then, emerged as a reaction against commercial design and user-centred functionality (Dunne & Raby, 2013; Malpass, 2014).

Critical design is contrasted with "affirmative" design, a term coined by Dunne and Raby (2021) to refer to design that reinforces the status quo or mainstream design practices that reproduce dominant norms and institutional values. Critical design, on the other hand, is an approach to design that interrogates the cultural, political, and epistemic conditions of design practice and the construction of meaning. Professor and designer Matt Malpass helped formalize critical design as an academic discipline and built on Freire's (1970) concept of dialogic education. Malpass suggests using discourse to start a debate and question norms. He further examines how critical design can be used as a pedagogical tool to develop students' capacity for ethical reasoning. From this perspective, design education shifts the shape of current design education away from skill-building alone toward critical literacy about the consequences of design decisions.

Despite its pedagogical and interpretive value, critical design has been subject to sustained critique. Tonkwise (2014) argues that while critical design positions itself outside ideological structures, it is, in practice, informed by institutional and cultural contexts. As a result, critical design risks further entrenching the status quo and masking aggravation as useful debate. Revell (2014) extends this by noting that critical design tends to be dominated by male, Western ideals, using the example of the number of critical design artifacts within cultural institutions. Bardzell and Bardzell (2013) similarly caution that critical design artifacts risk aestheticizing social problems, rather than confronting them. Lastly, Carroll (2015), arguing from a technical perspective, cautions that ambiguity can obscure questions of responsibility and accountability.

Methodology

This paper draws on a semester-long undergraduate design course in which critical design was introduced alongside design thinking as a parallel framework. This course combined studio projects, readings, and structured critique sessions. Design thinking was taught as a staged process, rather than as the broader concept of designerly ways of knowing (Cross, 1982). Critical design was introduced through readings and videos, dialogue, and speculative projects focused on social and ethical issues. The analysis here is based on classroom observation, student project work, and reflective discussions conducted throughout the term.

Shaping the Learning: Course Content and Pedagogical Approach

The pedagogical approach adopted in this course drew on critical design literature that positions learning as interpretive, dialogic, and reflective, rather than procedural. As mentioned, Malpass (2014) frames critical design as a discursive practice to foster ethical awareness in the classroom. Jakobsone (2017) characterizes critical design as a hermeneutic and hypothetical mode of enquiry that resists empirical validation. Accordingly, learning activities emphasized six critical practices: description, classification, contextualization,

elucidation, interpretation, and analysis (Carroll, 2009). These steps were revised into a circular, generative process as devised by Öztürk and Çıkış (2015). Following Bardzell and Bardzell's (2013) observation that the value of critical design depends on the ability to discuss design insightfully, the course emphasized developing a shared language for observing and discussing design artifacts.

To further support this interpretive learning process, students worked with a range of artifacts, including speculative, metaphorical, implementable, and probe-based (Zhu et al., 2024). The artifacts functioned as prompts for discussion and allowed students to engage at various levels of abstraction and materiality. Drawing on Tharpe and Tharpe's (2018) articulation of design as a process of continual reframing, the course was structured to encourage iterative shifts in perspective. Learning prioritized exploration and reinterpretation, reflecting critical design's role as reflective and discursive. This approach allowed students to explore multiple possible futures and interpretations without assuming an outcome.

Taken together, these pedagogical strategies shaped a learning environment in which critical design could operate alongside design thinking. While design thinking emphasizes process, problem framing, and iterative solution development, critical design foregrounds interpretation, ethical reflection, and speculative exploration. The following explores how students navigated these parallel frameworks in practice and how their work evolved over the course of the term.

Classroom Implementation: Student Projects

This section presents three projects that illustrate how students employed critical design strategies to interrogate ethical and systemic issues. These artifacts were discursive prompts, not solutions.

ETHICAL SAFARI RESERVE

Drawing on science fiction tropes and personal experience with hunting culture, one student developed a speculative "ethical safari" stocked with lab-grown animals. The project asked whether

synthetic life alters the moral status of killing. Is hunting a manufactured creature more acceptable than killing a wild one? By withholding any clear answer, the artifact destabilized assumptions about authenticity, violence, and human–animal relationships. Rather than solving a problem, the design staged a dilemma and demonstrated an early grasp of critical design's provocative and interrogative stance.

CANNABIS PILL BOTTLE

Another project began as a proposal to make cannabis more acceptable to skeptical parents. The student initially framed the work as a marketing exercise focused on desirability and persuasion—an approach aligned with affirmative design. Through critique and discussion, the focus shifted from promotion to perception. This reframing allowed the student to redesign cannabis packaging as a pharmaceutical pill bottle. This familiar medical form signalled legitimacy and utility, exposing how visual language shapes cultural acceptance. The resulting artifact operated not as advocacy but as commentary on trust, authority, and normalization.

RIGHTS FOR SALE

A third student struggled initially to articulate a critical position. Guided reflection and journaling helped surface concerns about the fragility of civil rights. The project ultimately reframed rights through the logic of consumer capitalism, presenting them as purchasable commodities in a "Human Rights Vending Machine." By exaggerating market logic to the point of absurdity, the artifact revealed the dangers of treating citizenship and justice as transactional. The work demonstrated how critical design can help students move from uncertainty to a pointed social critique.

While these projects demonstrated the utility of design education, their implementation also revealed several tensions that complicate the use of critical design in undergraduate contexts.

Pedagogical Tensions

Critical design's pedagogical promise is complicated by several structural and institutional tensions. Its historical basis is found in elite, Eurocentric industrial design contexts. Although critical design positions itself as a practice of questioning dominant systems, it still emerges from within those same structures of institutional and cultural privilege. This paradox shapes who has access and how critical design artifacts are framed. Second, critical design jeopardizes the reproduction of the very systems it challenges. While critical design is intended as a mode of social, political, and cultural critique, its artifacts frequently circulate within galleries, museums, and academic spaces that, in themselves, may be exclusionary. Furthermore, within these settings, critical design artifacts may be aesthetized rather than seen as a democratic form of critique. Finally, critical design remains unstable as a discipline. As Malpass (2017) notes, it resists clear categorization and functions as art, research, pedagogy, and activism. While this enables cross-disciplinary experimentation, it also complicates legitmization in education, where measurable skills and outcomes are prioritized.

Beyond the structured concerns, additional tensions emerged within the day-to-day realities of students. Engaging in future thinking or hypothetical inquiry requires both cognitive and emotional bandwidth. However, many students are simultaneously navigating financial precarity, employment demands, and even caregiving responsibilities. For students concerned with rent or food scarcity, critical design can feel disconnected from the lived realities of undergraduate students. This highlights how critical design can inadvertently assume forms of security or privilege. Acknowledging these material conditions is, therefore, essential to creating equitable learning environments.

Pedagogical tensions also arise from students' prior training. Many design programs have solution-oriented approaches that prioritize utility, efficiency, and user needs. Within this framework, success is measured by how effectively a problem is solved. Critical design, by contrast, asks students to suspend solutions, embrace ambiguity, and produce artifacts that function as questions rather than answers. Unsurprisingly, students often default to familiar problem-solving modes and can limit engagement with the speculative and interrogative stance that critical design requires.

Teaching critical design involves balancing the freedom to experiment with a sustained ethical commitment to accountability and social impact.

Assessment introduces further complexity. Traditional evaluation criteria of usability, polish, and functional success map poorly onto projects whose value lies in provocation, reflexivity, and critical engagement. Educators must therefore develop alternative rubrics that foreground interpretive depth, ethical reasoning, and the quality of inquiry over conventional measures of effectiveness. Without such adjustments, institutional grading structures risk pulling students back toward affirmative, solution-based outcomes.

Finally, the provocative nature of critical design raises questions of responsibility. Artifacts intended to unsettle assumptions may also cause harm, be misinterpreted, or inadvertently reinforce stereotypes. Students, therefore, require guidance not only in how to critique systems, but in how to anticipate consequences and act with care. Teaching critical design involves balancing the freedom to experiment with a sustained ethical commitment to accountability and social impact.

To address the tensions outlined above, the course incorporated a series of intentional scaffolding strategies designed to support students in engaging critical and speculative design practices. Rather than assuming that students would naturally adopt ambiguity, reflexivity, or ethical critique, these capacities were treated as skills to be explicitly developed. The following approaches sought to build shared language, redirect solution-oriented habits, align assessment with critical inquiry, and foreground responsibility within provocative work.

Scaffolding Critical Design in Practice

Four interrelated strategies structured the implementation of critical design within the course: establishing a shared critical language, modelling interpretive dialogue, normalizing ambiguity and failure, and aligning assessment with inquiry rather than resolution. Together, these strategies treated critical and speculative thinking as skills that can be deliberately cultivated.

First, the course prioritized developing a shared analytical vocabulary. Before introducing critical design projects, students were grounded in communication theory, formal analysis of visual composition, and semiotics to strengthen their ability to interpret artifacts as carriers of meaning rather than neutral solutions. Concepts such as sender/receiver models, framing, power relations, and cultural context provided students with tools to anticipate how designs circulate and are interpreted by different audiences. Before engaging in semiotic or critical interpretation, students learned formal and visual analysis rooted in visual literacy traditions (Dondis, 1973). This stage focused on compositional forces such as balance, movement, hierarchy, and tension, establishing how visual structures operate before interrogating what they signify. Semiotic analysis further positioned artifacts as systems of signs, codes, and symbols. This foundation enabled students to move beyond surface aesthetics and consider how form, language, and material choices shape perception and legitimacy. Establishing this shared language reduced anxiety and gave students concrete ways to discuss speculative work that might otherwise feel abstract or subjective.

Second, interpretive dialogue was embedded into weekly studio practice. Critical design is inherently discursive; its value lies less in the artifact itself than in the conversations it generates. Accordingly, critique sessions were structured not around judging success or polish, but around unpacking intent, ethics, and implications. Students were asked to articulate what assumptions their work exposed, who might benefit or be excluded, and what unintended consequences might arise. These discussions modelled critical design as a collective meaning-making process rather than an individual act of provocation. Over time, students became more comfortable situating their work within broader social, cultural, and political contexts.

Third, the course explicitly normalized ambiguity, iteration, and failure. Many students arrived trained to prioritize efficiency and definitive solutions, often equating uncertainty with poor performance. Because critical design resists closure and tidy outcomes, this mindset can inhibit experimentation. To counter this, reflective practices were incorporated throughout the term, including short post-mortems, journaling, and low-stakes exploratory exercises. Rather than asking whether a design "worked," students were prompted to consider what they tried, what they learned, and how their perspective had

shifted. Framing failure as exploration encouraged risk-taking and helped students remain engaged with speculative inquiry without defaulting prematurely to conventional solutions.

Fourth, assessment criteria were revised to better align with the goals of critical design. Traditional metrics such as usability, efficiency, or market readiness map poorly onto projects whose purpose is to provoke reflection or critique systems. Instead, evaluation emphasized the strength of the underlying question, the depth of contextual research, the clarity of critical framing, and evidence of iterative development. Reflexivity was weighted as heavily as the artifact itself. By assessing the quality of inquiry rather than the effectiveness of a solution, grading structures reinforced the epistemological shift from problem-solving to problem-posing.

Additional support activities complemented these strategies. Short case studies and brief video examples introduced students to existing critical design practices, building a shared repertoire of references. Structured prompts, such as identifying excluded audiences, reframing for opposing viewpoints, or swapping the values underpinning a design, helped students move beyond irony toward more substantive critique. These exercises provided accessible entry points into complex ethical and systemic issues while maintaining the work's exploratory character.

Taken together, these scaffolding practices reframed critical design not as an abstract theoretical stance but as a learnable mode of thinking. By combining conceptual foundations, dialogic critique, reflective processes, and aligned assessment, students were better equipped to navigate the tensions between design thinking's solution orientation and critical design's interrogative posture.

Discussion

Introducing critical design alongside design thinking revealed a productive friction between the two approaches. Design thinking provided structure and momentum through iterative processes of framing and prototyping, while critical design disrupted premature closure by asking students to pause, question, and reframe. Rather than positioning these approaches as oppositional, the course treated them as complementary.

Student work suggested that this dual framework encouraged more thoughtful and ethically attentive practice. Projects that began as conventional solutions often evolved into deeper inquiries when students questioned the assumptions underlying their briefs. In several cases, students reported that critical design assignments were the most challenging work of the term, yet also the most memorable. This aligns with existing literature suggesting that discomfort and ambiguity can shape deeper learning when appropriately supported.

At the same time, the tensions identified earlier, structural inequities, disciplinary ambiguity, and assessment challenges, remain significant. Critical design cannot be treated as a universal remedy. Without careful scaffolding and sensitivity to students' realities, speculative work risks alienating or provoking superficially. As educators, our responsibility is not simply to introduce critical frameworks, but to create conditions in which students can meaningfully engage them.

Conclusion

Shift shaping, as both a conference theme and a pedagogy, requires more than new tools or processes. It requires new ways of seeing. Critical design offers one such approach by repositioning design as a practice of questioning rather than problem-solving. This paper has argued that critical design is most effective when taught alongside, rather than in place of, design thinking. In doing so, design education shifts from training students merely to solve the problems presented to them, toward enabling them to ask whether those problems, and the systems that produce them, should exist at all. If design thinking helps us build the world as it is, critical design helps us question why it is that way and what else might be possible. It is within this space of questioning that meaningful shift shaping begins.

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"In Conversation" Review

BLAIR FRANCEY
MA RGD

LINK TO TALK ↗

"In Conversation" was developed as a way to bring the student voice into the mix of the Design Educators Conference. As an educator, I end every class with the opportunity for students to respond and provide feedback on the curriculum. Yes, they have the opportunity to do so through the College's official channels, but I'm interested in hearing from them directly so that I can adapt and change my course material to better suit the needs of my students pedagogically.

I find this approach and strategy helpful as I want to ensure that the students are getting the best education possible and are engaged with the material. But also so that I can provide them with the help and guidance they need along the way – whether they are aware of it or not.

The act of educating future generations of designers is not something I take particularly lightly. As someone who did not go through the traditional educational channels to get to where I am today, it has taken me a while to feel comfortable with the idea that I should be at the front of a class discussing theories and concepts.

I saw the opportunity for "In Conversation" as way to bring the 'teaching' and 'learning' conversation out of the classroom and into a forum where other Design Educators can hear from current and recent graduates of the design education system. In a field that has

seen an incredible amount of change in a short amount of time, I welcome any and all opportunities to further the conversation about how we, as educators, can best serve our students.

The first workshop, of what I hope to be an ongoing series, took place during the 2025 Design Educators conference at George Brown Polytechnic in Toronto. Myself and six students from various design programs across the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) representing York University, Seneca Polytechnic, George Brown Polytechnic, Conestoga College, and Toronto Metropolitan University, sat down for a fireside-style talk.

When asked to describe the state of design education in one word, we heard: siloed, adaptable, varied, and individuality.

Adaptable was a word that struck me as a good thing. Nicki, a recent graduate from Conestoga, remarked at how the first years were doing work that was "miles ahead" of what she did in first year. This is good. Design programs need to have the flexibility to bring in those new technologies and ways of thinking as quickly as an academic setting allows. In the same breath, she mentioned that we also risk losing foundational, hands-on design practices in a rush to adopt new technologies. While understanding how to write a prompt for AI is becoming something we need to understand more and more these days, it's also just as important to understand the rule of thirds or why kerning is important for legibility.

The other word that caught my attention was "siloed." Academia is a big ship and trying to get it to move away from the way things have always been done is not an easy task. The students expressed how siloed the programs can feel at times with little cross over from, say, print to digital UX/UI unless they formally switched streams. Group work generally happens within a course cohort and not across disciplines or programs. The industry is starting to err on the side of more "jack of all trades" designers; having an understanding of how to work with Pantones while also being able to code some CSS and now thinking about the ethics of creating with AI means students require more touch points across their education than perhaps some of the more established schools currently offer. Wouldn't it be great if design students were able to audit classes from other programs to get a base-level understanding of what a game designer goes through to create their characters and vice versa; what if a game designer wanted to start their own studio and was able to step into the branding program for a bit?

I was curious to know about both positive and negative experiences they had in their education journeys. Overall, there was a sense that lessons they had learnt in school actually did make a difference in how they approached the work or were able to explain theories to other students–the lessons had landed for them. What's more interesting was to hear about assignments or lessons that missed the mark, as this is the opportunity for learning as an educator. My assignment briefs are structured in three parts: What, How, Why. I want to make it clear what they are doing, how they're expected to do it, and why this assignment is relevant. The discussion about projects that missed the mark revealed that some assignments felt disconnected from industry practices or weren't framed in a way that gave the students any understanding of its relevance. There are a few things that we, as educators, need to keep in mind when developing assignments: is it relevant to the work they may be doing in the real world? Is this something that they can use for their portfolio? Does the brief give them enough parameters to work in while allowing for creativity? Is the assignment expanding on the lessons being taught in a way that allows the students to think critically about what they've learnt?

Love it or hate it, group work is a reality in a lot of classes across the academic spectrum. But does group work help or hinder students when it expands beyond the assigned class time? Emily, from George Brown, noted how difficult it can be to coordinate with classmates outside of the class due to part–time jobs or other commitments everyone has. Her take on group work was that it is most effective when everyone shows up to class, as they're expected to, and get together then and there to collaborate in a single class. This way no one suffers when there is an absent group member. In some ways, this operates more in the style of how a real studio would operate. Nicki also mentioned that her class had a few lessons on how to communicate with other people, which is an incredibly useful skill for when you are put into a group situation and need to be able to make sure everyone is on the same page.

The last point that really struck me in our conversation was when Kaoutar, a recent graduate from Seneca, talked about how she didn't feel there was much of an introduction to the industry or the actual business side of it until very late in her education. There was a lack of knowledge of places like RGD as a resource coming from her professors. A lot of the connections she made were through her own initiative. In an industry that is so much about knowing those in the

In the end as much as we tell our students to stay curious, we also need to heed our own advice and also stay curious.

industry, I think it's an important part of our role as design educators to help with those introductions or at least give our students the tools and resources to understand who's out there, what studios are doing great work, and why conferences such as Design Thinkers are a worthwhile investment. In the Design Foundation class I teach for the first year Honours Bachelor of Brand Design students, I have started taking them on studio tours of places in Toronto they should know about. It's an opportunity for them to start a conversation with those who are shaping the design landscape in the city and I think the students start to understand a bit more about the world they're going to be stepping into at some point.

While this was only a forty-five minute discussion, I believe it has started an important dialogue between the students and educators. There are so many more conversations and reflections to be had, but my main takeaway from this first one was to not stop questioning. Is this the right assignment? Will they understand the connection with the lessons? Is this something that will prepare them for the realities of the real world? How do I make sure I'm using the best case studies in my lessons? It's not easy to constantly be updating materials when most of us are teaching part-time, have a full-time job, and a life outside of it all. But in the end as much as we tell our students to stay curious, we also need to heed our own advice and also stay curious. As quickly as our industry shifts and changes, we have to keep up with the advances and bring them into our curriculum.

Command+g Design Lab:

A Model for Accessible, Experiential, and Inclusive Design Education

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LINK TO TALK ↗

KEYWORDS

Experiential learning
Student design studio
Professional experience

ABSTRACT

Command+g Design Lab is a faculty-founded, student-run studio that models an accessible, experiential, and inclusive approach to design education. Established in 2018 at Rochester Institute of Technology, the studio provides a professional environment where students engage in client work, develop leadership skills, and participate in iterative design processes. Its structure mirrors industry practices through defined roles, project management systems, and faculty mentorship, allowing students to build confidence while navigating real-world challenges. Important concepts such as client communication, scope management, and interdisciplinary teamwork are discussed as a studio. Founded to address inequities in design leadership—particularly the underrepresentation of women and nonbinary designers—the studio promotes equitable participation and fosters a supportive culture centered on professionalism, resilience, and experiential learning. Over eight years, Command+g has demonstrated measurable impact on student readiness, professional development, and career placement, offering a scalable model for experiential learning in higher education.

AUTHOR BIOS

Keli DiRisio is an Associate Professor of Graphic Design in the School of Design at RIT. She focuses her research and pedagogy on designing for emotion and with empathy, motion graphics and the message, and exciting and beautiful typography. Always ready to learn something new, Keli is often doing tutorials and taking classes to learn something new that she can share with her classes. She is currently developing an app with two social workers for college students to help them deal with the stressors and emotional impact of college life. Keli strives to teach her students to use their voices to deliver impactful messages and to be strong visual narrators.

Carol Fillip is an Associate Professor at Rochester Institute of Technology in the School of Design, specifically Graphic Design. As a design educator, she strives to foster critical thinking to allow students to develop problem-solving strategies and life-long learning skills as she guides them to become thoughtful designers whose work is appropriate, functional, impactful, adaptable, distinct, and timeless. Experiential education combined with socially responsible design are important to her as she leads by example involving herself and her students with many community and culturally minded initiatives.

Introduction

Design education is undergoing significant shifts as institutions adapt to emerging technologies, societal change, and increasingly interdisciplinary creative practices. Command+g Design Lab, a faculty–founded, student–run design studio launched in 2018, offers a compelling model for experiential learning that incorporates professional readiness, leadership development, and community–centered design. Originating as a women–led design club, the studio fosters an environment that mirrors industry practice while maintaining the supportive structure of an academic setting. This format allows students to learn through authentic client engagements, collaborative team structures, and reflective design processes. Command+g's operational model greatly contributes to student learning, design leadership pathways, and the development of accessible, equitable approaches to creative education.

Design programs have long sought to balance theoretical instruction and practical application, a tension that continues to shape conversations in contemporary design pedagogy. While coursework offers students essential foundations in conceptual development, visual literacy, design theory, processes, and principles, these classroom–based experiences often operate within controlled environments that cannot fully replicate the realities of real–world design practice. As a result, many students report feeling underprepared when transitioning from the predictability of academic work to the uncertainties of client work, where expectations may shift rapidly and communication requires a high degree of maturity and knowledge. The realities of navigating team dynamics can also be challenging; collaborating with peers in professional settings demands skills such as conflict resolution, negotiation, and the ability to integrate differing perspectives into cohesive design solutions, and many times, working on cross–disciplinary teams. Additionally, the business aspects of design, such as managing scope, understanding budgets, feedback cycles, and meeting shifting deadlines, are often only lightly addressed in traditional curricula. This gap between academic preparation and professional realities underscores the importance of experiential learning models that allow students to engage meaningfully with authentic clients, diverse teams, and the practical constraints that define contemporary design work.

Experiential Learning

Experiential learning has thus become essential within many creative disciplines. In design education, experiential learning may include real client projects, collaborative studio environments, or service-learning partnerships. However, these approaches vary widely in scope, structure, and depth. Command+g Design Lab was established to provide a more immersive alternative: a student-run studio whose operations mirror the professional world while maintaining pedagogical scaffolding and faculty mentorship. All students are paid employees, and are considered designers of various levels, dependent upon their year level and experience. Team leadership is often rotated to build confidence and accountability and student mentorship that fosters shared learning is a key part of the studio.

Command+g Design Lab was founded at Rochester Institute of Technology by two graphic design faculty members and four female students seeking to create a more inclusive, collaborative, and practice-oriented environment within the university. The name "Command+g," referencing the grouping shortcut in design software, symbolizes the studio's ethos of shared agency and collective problem-solving in addition to the community that is fostered within the studio. Grouping elements with design software allows for alignment, consistency, and unified movement which are concepts mirrored in the studio's collaborative culture. Students support one another through critique sessions, peer mentoring, workshops, and cross-disciplinary conversations.

IN THE UK

Women make up

63%

of design graduates

18%

hold high-ranking leadership roles

Women in the Design Industry

The founders recognized ongoing inequities in the design industry and wanted to address them, especially the underrepresentation of women and nonbinary designers in creative leadership roles. Despite comprising a significant portion of the design workforce, women remain markedly underrepresented in senior and leadership positions, accounting for less than 11% of design leadership roles. In the UK, women make up approximately 63% of design graduates, yet only 18% hold director-level or other high-ranking leadership roles. The pattern is similar in the United States: a 2021 AIGA survey found that while women account for about 61% of the overall design workforce, they represent just 24% of those in leadership positions. (Maher, 2025)

IN THE US

Women make up

61%

of the design workforce

24%

of those are leadership positions

By establishing a design studio, the faculty aimed to challenge these disparities and create pathways for students to experience leadership within a supportive, experiential setting. What started as a Women in Design group began attracting requests for professional design work. This interest was the springboard for spending a year writing a business plan, presenting it to the dean, and then the provost, to create a fully functioning studio on a university campus. At the time of its creation, curriculum had been lacking real-world experience that went beyond simulated coursework or traditional internships. The studio provided an excellent opportunity for students to learn through real-world practice.

Over the years, Command+g Design Lab has grown into a vibrant interdisciplinary community. More than sixty students have participated as designers, illustrators, UX/UI designers, motion designers, exhibit creators, strategists, project managers, and studio leaders. The studio engages with clients ranging from university partners and nonprofit organizations to national and international brands, giving students exposure to a wide range of project types, audiences, and design challenges and fostering a flexible skill set that prepares students for multiple professional trajectories.

Command+g's methods blend structured studio systems with open-ended creative exploration. Students may be appointed to and/or promoted to roles such as Creative Director, Art Director, Project Manager, Lead Designer or Designer. Also, business majors are hired to be the Studio Manager and the Business Manager. These students manage the project organization, initial client meetings, invoicing and account management, including billing and the finances of the studio. These roles mirror industry positions, but they are scaffolded through faculty coaching and client communications.

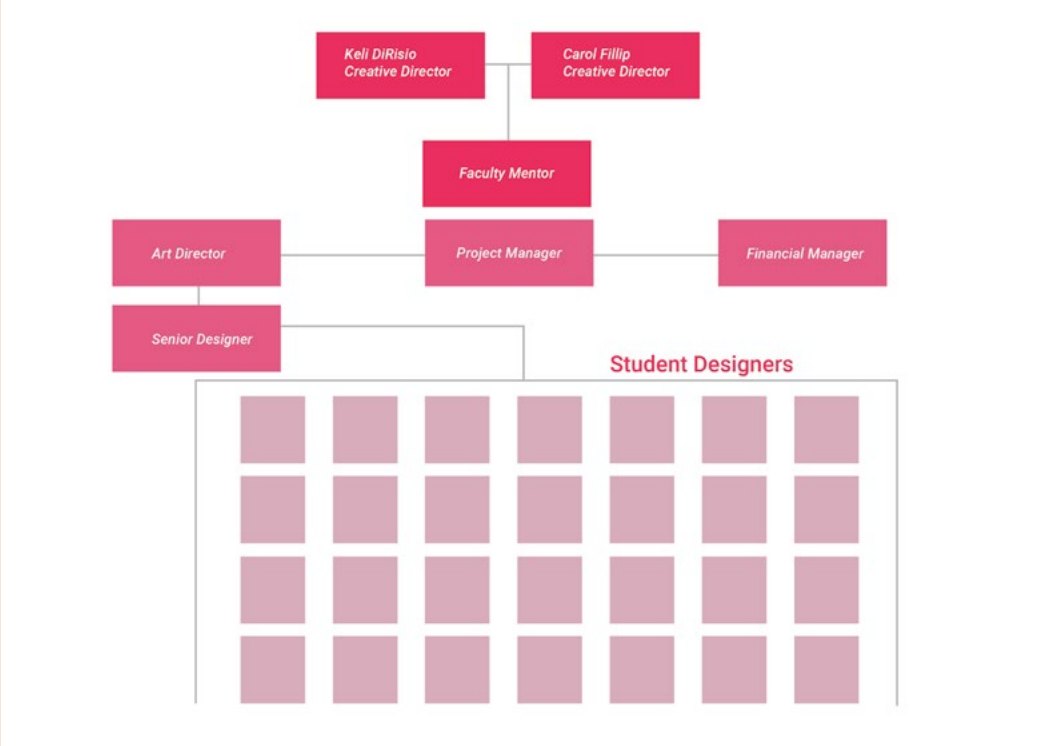
Workflow and Organization

Workflow goes through the stages of client engagement, from project intake through research, ideation, revision, and final delivery (Figure 1).

Figure 1 →
Workflow Stages of the studio

The organizational chart (Figure 2) demonstrates how leadership roles intersect with collaborative teams, offering students opportunities to practice structured decision-making. Faculty oversight is a critical part of the studio; students must get faculty approval on projects before showing with clients. This is to ensure that work is being done to the job specs and contract. This is also is a teaching moment for the faculty and students, as specific things such as file formats, design theory, and typographic usage can be discussed.

Figure 2 →
Organizational chart
for Command+g



The studio functions much like a professional design environment, immersing students in the full spectrum of collaborative creative work. Sessions often begin with group brainstorming, where students generate ideas, exchange perspectives, and challenge one another to think critically about visual and conceptual possibilities. From there, the students proceed into sketching, conceptual exploration, and iterative prototyping, allowing students to translate abstract ideas into tangible design directions. Working side-by-side with their peers, students develop essential interpersonal skills, learning not only how to articulate their own ideas, but also how to actively listen, provide constructive critique, and build upon the contributions of others.

Client-Centered Design

A core component of the studio experience is the emphasis on client–centered design. Students engage directly with clients, navigating rounds of revisions and feedback to refine their work in response to real–world expectations. They learn to interpret client comments, identify underlying needs, and adjust their design solutions accordingly. These encounters require students to practice clarity in communication, defend their design decisions through well–reasoned rationale, and adapt their approaches when challenges arise. This ongoing cycle of critique, revision, and refinement fosters resilience and adaptability, all qualities that are crucial in the professional design landscape, where change and iteration are constant.

Figure 3 →
Unlabeled Music Festival, School of Performing Arts, RIT. Designer: Kennedy Intihar.

Through this immersive workflow, students gain a deep understanding of how collaborative processes, client interactions, and iterative problem–solving shape successful design outcomes. The studio's structure bridges the gap between academic learning and industry practice, equipping students with the confidence and readiness to enter the design profession with a strong, experience–based foundation. Client and design issues are often discussed within the studio, along with solutions of how to deal with difficult situations such as miscommunication, unpredictable and ambiguous feedback, and unhappy clients. Scope creep (when a project exceeds its initial goals or deliverables) is often a topic of discussion as students don't always understand that they can and sometimes need to say no to a client. Students learn to identify and address client conflict early in the process, through communication, contract clarity, and iterative feedback loops. Faculty involve students in conversations from the start of a project to help them understand budget, estimating, deadlines, and expectations. Another central concept is the deliverable, its constraints, and existing client requests. Understanding deliverables, such as branding, illustrations, websites, posters, or social media content to name a few, helps students estimate the amount of time it would take to complete a project, and they must learn to balance their workload between their coursework and Command+g work, negotiate timelines, and articulate solid and cohesive design decisions.

Student Experiences

Operating for almost 8 years, Command+g has demonstrated measurable impacts on student confidence, leadership development, and industry preparation. Students consistently report that their experiences in the studio provide a clearer understanding of professional expectations and describe the environment as simultaneously challenging and supportive, giving them the space to fail safely while also learning from those experiences. This experience has directly led into internships and jobs, and student say they feel very prepared to enter a work environment. (Karakoç & Yildirim, 2020)

Students from Command+g students have secured roles with industry leaders such as Crocs, Fisher–Price, American Girl, Lands' End, LL Bean, L3 Harris, Bass Pro Shops, and Walmart. Students attribute their success to Command+g's emphasis on teamwork, communication, and authentic project experience. Beyond professional pathways, they also develop interpersonal skills such as conflict resolution, emotional intelligence, and ethical decision–making.

Command+g offers insights into how student–run studios can support diverse learners within higher education. For students who thrive in hands–on environments, the studio provides a sustained period of applied practice. It can also help in the difficult moments too, as the studio uses perceived failure and frustration to build resilience and adaptability. For students who prefer structured guidance, faculty mentors and peer leaders offer consistent feedback and direction.

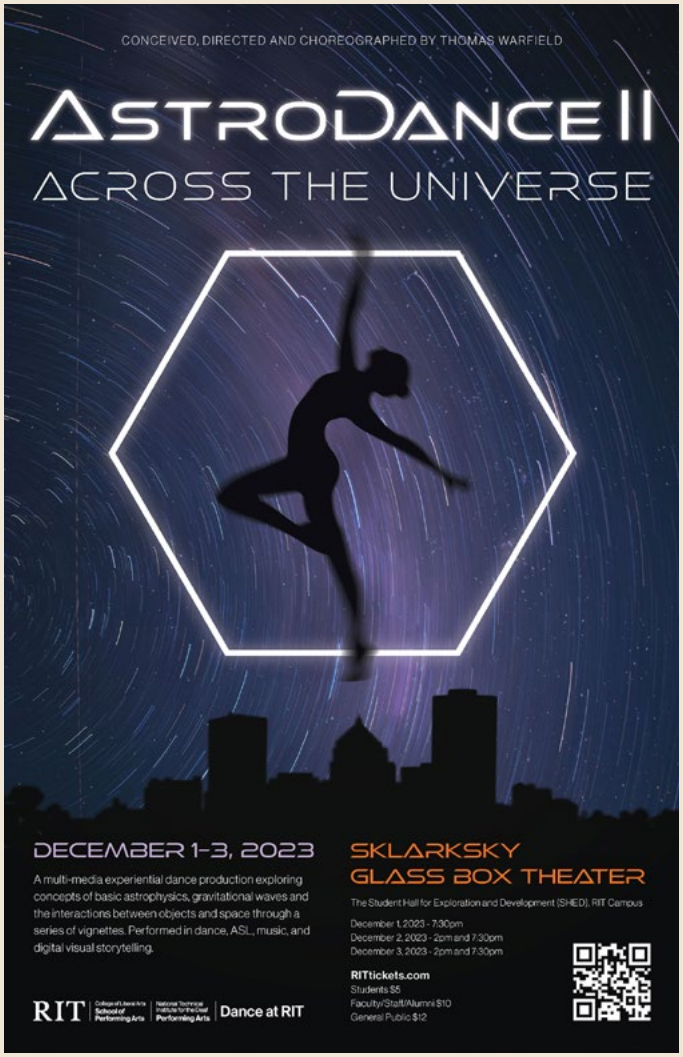
The studio also advances equity in design education. By emphasizing women and nonbinary leadership, Command+g challenges long–standing imbalances in the profession. The structure ensures that students from historically marginalized backgrounds have access to leadership opportunities that may otherwise feel inaccessible. Additionally, the studio's emphasis on accessible communication, such as providing alt text, verbal image descriptions, and clearly structured meetings, supports students with diverse cognitive and sensory needs.

Incorporating a Studio Model

From a broader perspective, Command+g demonstrates how experiential learning can be embedded into academic culture without requiring large–scale institutional change. It operates as a flexible, scalable model that other universities could adopt or adapt according to their contexts and needs.

Command+g Design Lab represents a dynamic intersection of professional practice, creative exploration, and educational innovation. Through its accessible, inclusive, and collaborative approach, it prepares students to navigate both the challenges and possibilities of contemporary design work. The studio exemplifies how hands–on learning environments can foster confidence, leadership, and resilience among emerging designers.

Figure 4 →
AstroDance, RIT. Designer: Clare Downey



Future research could investigate how student-run design studios operate across different institutional settings, examining variations in structure, mentorship models, client engagement, and leadership opportunities. Comparative studies could illuminate which aspects of these studios are universally effective and which are context-dependent, helping educators better understand how to adapt studio-based models to diverse programs, resources, and student populations. Additionally, further inquiry into experiential learning environments could focus on how these spaces might better support neurodiverse learners, exploring strategies related to communication, sensory considerations, cognitive flexibility, and inclusive team dynamics. Such research could provide valuable insights into how design studios can be intentionally shaped to promote equitable participation and success for students with a wide range of learning needs and outcomes.

Figure 5 ↑
Peace Corps China Association.
Designer: Michelle Fu

Conclusion

As design education continues to evolve in response to shifting cultural, technological, and professional landscapes, models like Command+g will play a crucial role in shaping pedagogies that are responsive, equitable, and deeply engaged with real-world contexts. Student-run studios offer a powerful framework for bridging academic and professional environments, providing learners with meaningful opportunities to practice leadership, navigate collaboration, and engage with authentic design challenges. By studying, refining, and expanding these models, educators can continue building learning environments that not only prepare students for the demands of contemporary practice but also cultivate the confidence, adaptability, and critical awareness needed to lead the future of the design field.

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