Decolonizing the Design Curriculum: Design Process, Shared Understanding, and Collaborative Practices

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PAPER

Design curriculum and pedagogy are implicated in the exclusion, invalidation, and/or decentring of some knowledge systems, and exclusion and marginalisation of certain types of students and educators. This paper discusses curriculum design, knowledge translation, and co-construction in the context of casualisation and coloniality. The paper argues that decolonising design curriculum and pedagogy requires approaches that move beyond inclusive and diverse content towards considering power dynamics inherent in the student-teacher relationships. It approaches decolonising design curriculum and pedagogy as a collaboratively 'performed' practice that enables course coordinator and tutor teaching teams to share control, and tutor teaching teams and students to exercise agency

INTRODUCTION

Design curriculum and pedagogy are implicated in the exclusion, invalidation, and/or decentring of some knowledge systems, and exclusion and marginalisation of certain types of students and educators. (Ahrentzen 2003; Parvin and Moore 2020; Gürel and Anthony 2006; Davis, Daniels, and Wilson 2014; Kurjenoja 2013). This is further complicated by the increasing casualisation of the university workforce globally (Richardson and Heffernan 2019). The paper argues that decolonising design curriculum and pedagogy requires approaches that move beyond inclusive and diverse content towards considering power dynamics inherent in the student-teacher relationships due to socialization in design studios. To understand designing curriculum, knowledge translation, and co-construction in the context of casualisation and coloniality, this paper presents the case of a second-year architectural design studio course taught at The University of Queensland in semester 1, 2022 as collaboratively 'performed' practices of course coordinator, tutor teams, and students.

DECOLONISATION AND CASUALISATION

The decolonization project in architectural education is underpinned by tenacious 'extractive' practices such as precarious employment. The discourses on casual employment typically paint a rosy picture of such employment affording choice

and flexibility but downplays the risks such as lack of security (Cassidy 11 April, 2023). Precarity and exploitative working conditions present a platform for recognising and addressing the aftershocks of colonialism (Van Milders 2021) and the enduring power patterns of colonialism (Maldonado-Torres 2016).

In Australia, 65% of all university jobs are casual or limited term contracts (Kniest 2018). However, the number is significantly higher in architecture, with 77% employed casually (Maroya, Matthewson, and Wallis 2019). Casualisation is normalised through categorisation of casual academics based on motivations for employment, career goals, and employment mode preference. Such discourses favour choice and assumes that easy availability and willingness of casual academics implies that they prefer flexibility and/or view casual teaching as a pathway towards more secure employment (Junor 2004). Decolonising design curricula and pedagogy requires balancing the knowledge-power nexus (Chakrabarty 2021; Danowski and Castro 2017) and moving beyond merely adding content from diverse cultures towards acknowledging 'entangled' histories, perspectives, and narratives (Tsing 2005; Wa Thiongo 1998).

METHODOLOGY: CASE AND CONTEXT

This qualitative study employs case study methodology which is defined as an in-depth investigation of a particular bounded system, phenomena, or case (Yin 2018). The performances and practices of the course coordinator (designing and coordinating), tutors (translating), and students (co-constructing) are explored to understand how design curriculum and pedagogy can be decolonised.

The context of the second-year studio course is understood through its foundational role within the degree program, its learning goals, and theme. The studio course is third in a series of six courses that students are required to take in the three-year degree program. In response to the pandemic, the course was offered in face-to-face and online modes simultaneously. The learning goals for the course include developing knowledge of analogue and digital models and drawings in the analysis of historical precedents for generating new designs, applying architectural concepts to a moderately complex design problem, and communicating a developed design proposal. The course
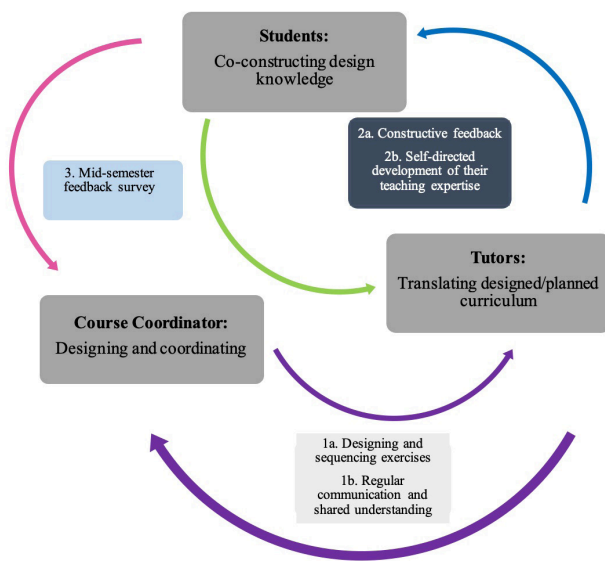
Figure 1. Performative and collaborative 'spaces in-between' for decolonising design curriculum and pedagogy. (Credit: Aparna Datey)

theme of 'memory and history' required students to develop design solutions through experimentation, iteration, collaboration, and review presentation in a studio setting. The course learning goals included: using analogue and digital models and drawings in the analysis of historical precedents towards generating new architectural designs; applying architectural concepts to a moderately complex design problem; and communicating a developed design proposal using reflective and analytical drawings and models. The project considered 'environmental factors' outlined in the degree goals and focused on recent floods in Brisbane, Australia (February 2022, 2011, and 1974) and students were required to design a Flood Resilience Exhibition and Education Centre on the University campus. The selection of site on the university campus provided a familiar location for face-to-face and online students alike. The medium-sized building program (400 sqm) included exhibition spaces, classrooms, library, office, meeting rooms, space for an artist-in-residence, and supporting areas such as lobby, toilets, and facilities.

The course coordinator and the team of tutors (professional architects and/or doctoral/masters' students) were all casually employed. The course coordinator was a doctoral student with extensive teaching and professional practice experiences. The teaching team included two male and two female tutors (adjuncts). Three tutors were professional architects (two were registered) and one was a doctoral student with professional practice experiences. One tutor was a highly experienced teacher; one had taught other courses but not design studio; and two were tutoring for the first time. The team of tutors had expertise in designing and constructing a flood resilient residence, surveying and documenting site, and online studio teaching. There were 71 students enrolled in the course. The ratio of

tutor-student was 1:21 in the face-to-face sections and 1:8 in the online section. Most students had begun their study right out of high school, however there were some mature age students, and a third of the cohort comprised of international students.

PERFORMED CURRICULUM AND PEDAGOGY

The course design emphasised critiquing dominant models and imagining alternatives and considered how it would be translated by tutors and co-constructed by students and tutors in design studios. It underscored performative aspects which enables producing "third spaces (spaces in between) where seemingly disparate knowledge's can be equitably compared and function to work together" (Le Grange 2016, 9) to re-balance the knowledge-power nexus. The 'spaces in between' in this design studio course included the translation of in-studio exercises and feedback discussions between tutors and students, mid-semester feedback survey, and regular communication between course coordinator and tutor team (Fig. 1).

SPACE IN BETWEEN 1

The course coordinator's 'performance' and practices included: (a) designing and sequencing exercises and (b) supporting the tutor teaching team.

(a) Designing and sequencing exercises

The exercises included precedent study, site observation and analysis, learning through making, and storyboarding. Students maintained a design book throughout the semester to record their design process. Each exercise was designed to share control with tutors and students and diffuse the power dynamics inherent in the student-tutor and tutor-course coordinator relationship.

Precedent study: An inclusive archive of precedents was selected from *Archdaily* (arguably the most popular online resource for architecture) which critiqued the dominance of certain canons and examples. It provided access to global projects, made the work of diverse architects 'visible', and made space for sharing multiple histories, narratives, and perspectives (Cimadomo, García Rubio, and Shahdadpuri Aswani 2018). Tutors were invited to add and contribute to the archive. Students analysed a precedent from the curated archive and another of their choosing based on researching exemplars. Precedent studies were uploaded on the learning management system (via Padlet) which enabled students to browse, identify useful precedents, and reflect on how to address the design problem.

Site observation and analysis: Observations of site generated a personal 'memory' archive that enabled students to 'construct' the site through direct encounter (Pallasmaa 2013, 190). While face-to-face cohorts could visit the site, the online cohort had to rely on photographs and videos. Students catalogued the 'visible' and 'temporal' aspects to develop understanding of context and scale (Olin 2008, 86; Heath and Chapman 2020).

Figure 2. Collages describing concept (Credit: Yue Zhang)

Site specificity was framed as zones of control, influence, and effect (Burns and Kahn 2005). Site was understood as being acted upon or influenced by external forces such as social, cultural, political, national, local, environmental, and climatic. Site analysis required students to reflect on and describe what aspects of the context were important to them and influenced what design moves they made.

Learning through making: This exercise emphasised making drawings and models and learning from and with peers. These artefacts and processes produce a responsive 'language of design' and help students make meaning and co-construct 'designerly ways of knowing' (Cross 1982/2006). Students made site models (1:200) in small groups or individually which gave them a sense of control and equalised the experiences of face-to-face and online cohorts. It developed making, thinking, sharing, and collaboration skills.

Through making study models students explored massing, program, organisation, scale, circulation, siting, and relationships to generate multiple solutions. Eventually, digital modelling allowed for making precise and detailed models that could be easily transformed. Students made partial sectional models (1:20) and exploded axonometric drawings for presentation at the end of the semester.

Storyboarding: Students finalised their concept and represented it in a storyboard to back up their design moves and decisions (Davids 1999). The storyboards represented their responses to site and program and articulated spatial sequence and experiences. A student saw themselves as an activist architect and was inspired by art installations and flowing debris. The student made collages and a video to explore their ideas (Fig. 2), and the storyboard described their decisions about form, positioning, orientation, use, movement, and views (Fig. 3).

Design books and reflection on design process: Students were required to record their internal thinking process in a design book (Schuldenfrei 2020). The design book provided opportunity to reflect and construct meaning through descriptions, backing up and evaluating decisions, and considering and integrating diverse perspectives to move towards critical analysis linking to students' unique experiences and understanding (Fig. 4).

(b) Supporting the tutor team

The course coordinator supported the tutor teaching team by organising a pre-semester meeting, regular (weekly) meetings, and marking moderation meetings (twice in the semester) to communicate and share project details, tasks and activities, course learning goals, common student issues and challenges, and assessing quality of student projects. The leadership role of course coordinators helps develop a collegial and supportive environment (Lefoe et al. 2011; Roberts et al. 2012). The practice-based expertise of casual academics is "tacit, situated in a specific context and learned through trial and error and observation of others" (Lefoe et al. 2011, 3), which makes the teaching team the most effective unit for "developing the complex knowledge, attitudes and skills involved in teaching" (Prebble et al. 2005, 91). At the teaching-team level, the conversations during such meetings were "micro-level" (Viskovic 2006, 323) "situated social practices" (Knight, Tait, and Yorke 2006) that create opportunities for tutors to reflect and change their practices and shape their academic identity as university educators. These meetings orient tutors through sharing knowledge and prevent teaching practices from becoming "an individual form of practiced, internalized knowledge and expertise" (Mareis 2012, 66). They serve as "universalizing mediation" (Bourdieu 1977, 79), ensuring that teaching practices are discerning and appropriate to the context and help tutors continuously construct/reconstruct their personal knowledge about studio teaching and develop expertise. These meetings provided accessible discipline-specific professional development which makes headway towards inclusion of all academics in the discourses on teaching effectiveness, student learning, and quality education (Datey 2022b).

SPACE IN BETWEEN 2
Tutors' 'performances' included: (a) providing constructive feedback to students which involved behaviours that prompt co-construction of knowledge, and (b) engaging in self-directed development of their teaching expertise through conversations with colleagues.

(a) Providing constructive feedback and co-constructing knowledge

Providing constructive feedback included 'reading' students and their work-in-progress (drawings and models), quickly gauge what diverse learners need, and responding 'on the spot' moment-by-moment by managing their actions and behaviours. Tutors' teaching behaviours include positioning, posture and body movements, forgetting, storytelling, and eye contact
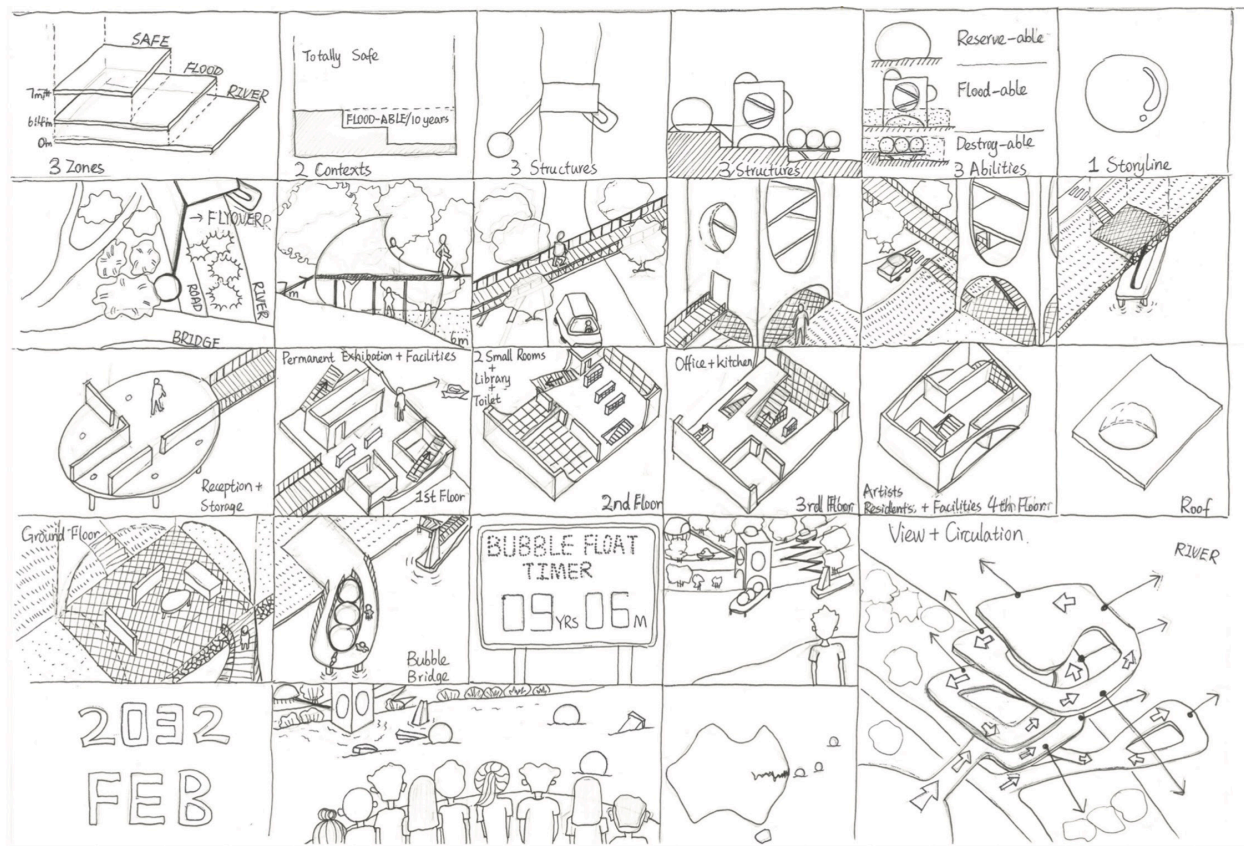
Figure 3. : Storyboard for decision-making (Credit: Yue Zhang)

and gaze on shared materials to actively engage students and mutually share in the task of learning through conversation and externalisation, and negotiating power dynamics of the student-teacher relationship (Datey 2022a). Tutors pick up cues during such interactions and make discerning judgements about how to relate to diverse learners, gauge their needs, adjust responses to elicit cooperation or express authority by displaying mirroring postures or body orientations and convey that control is shared. They use incomplete sentences and pauses and appear to 'forget' which act as invitations to 'fill-in' on the spot. Tutors use verbal descriptions, nonverbal sketching/drawing or 'playing', and gestures which provide a bridge between abstract ideas and "gambits" or design actions to familiarize students with the design process. Tutors' gazes were primarily on students' shared materials and eye contact was flexible and could be, and in many situations was, deployed by to convey messages that are persuasive, reinforcing and/or censoring. They may use eye contact to build perceptions of themselves as more experienced and knowledgeable experts, caring collaborators and/or role models. Tutors empowered students to exercise their agency and supported student learning by managing power dynamics inherent in the student-tutor relationship.

(b) Self-directed development of teaching expertise

Tutors mostly teach independently within their tutorial cohorts but make effort to balance their personal knowledge and agency by seeking and sharing knowledge with colleagues. Without formal teacher training, tutors develop studio teaching practice and expertise 'on-site' in design studios or 'on the job.' Considering practice as the 'site of knowing' (Nicolini 2011), such 'on site' learning generates shared understanding about the course learning goals, project, and quality assessment. Tutors also engage in 'as needed' conversations with other tutors in the team. These self-organised interactions create communities of practice where through mutual engagement tutors develop a shared repertoire from which to learn about and develop their studio teaching practices. Tutors learn to teach or enhance their teaching 'on the job' through practice including design conversations with students during feedback discussions, team teaching, and through 'as needed' conversations with colleagues during teaching (Datey 2022b).

SPACE IN BETWEEN 3

For most students, learning in design studios is their most formative encounter with the knowledge and values of the discipline and profession. Students learn from the design curriculum which is translated by tutors in design studios. Studio pedagogy is identified as performative, where learning focuses on process and occurs socially through project- and problem-based
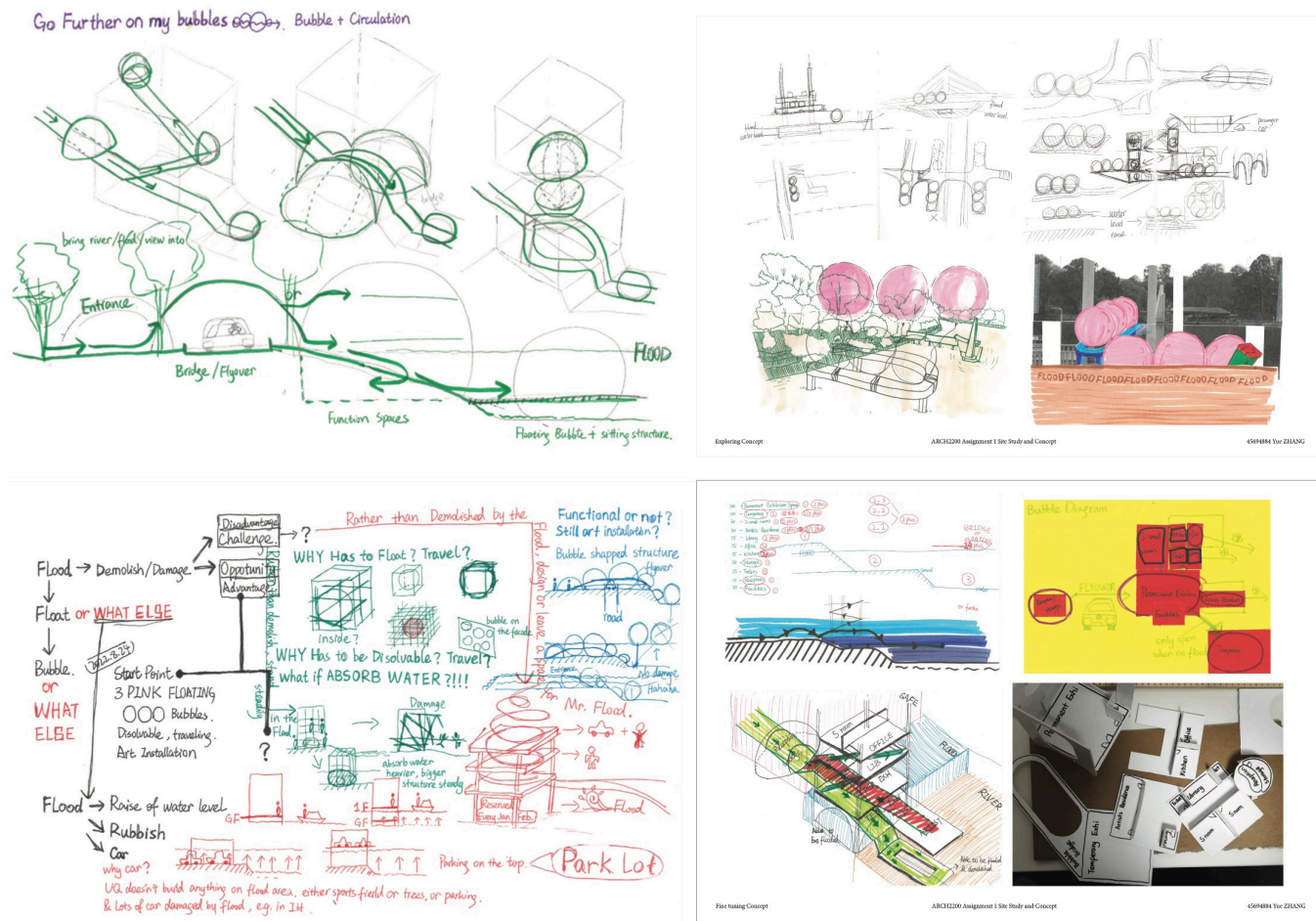
Figure 4. Pages from a student's design book (Credit: Yue Zhang)

learning, which includes learning by doing, experiential learning, dealing with uncertainty, projection and representation, communication via public performance, and the physical studio spaces themselves serving as socialising elements (Shreeve, Sims, and Trowler 2010).

Midway through the semester, feedback was sought from students and was discussed with tutors at a regular weekly meeting. While feedback from students is sought via Student Evaluations of Teaching at the end of the semester, the mid-term survey facilitated finetuning feedback during the semester. Students articulated that:

"Feedback was very beneficial in progressing the design as they [course coordinator, tutor and guest critics] provided a different perspective on the project. They also provided the feedback in a way that was inspiring and not degrading."

They noted that precedent study helped in:

"Seeing architectural examples which weren't a part of the typical architectural 'canon' [which] made the outputs seem accessible."

They found site observation and analysis:

"...most interesting...[as they]...could get a feel of the environment and what we were working with. I could envision ideas in my head...[about what to] implement in that space."

Students found making models:

"...interesting as it allowed me to experience my design in a way that I hadn't previously [and] enabled me to have a critical site analysis strategy..."

Students were challenged by the storyboarding exercise but noted that it was:

"…helpful for choosing what is most important to convey in my drawings."

Students found that recording their design process in a design book was:

"…a good way to explore design ideas…a bit challenging having to write and put everything down but was overall beneficial for my progress."

CONCLUSION

This paper approaches decolonising design curriculum and pedagogy as a collaboratively 'performed' practice that enables course coordinator and tutor teaching teams to share control, and tutor teaching teams and students to exercise agency. It conceives of curriculum design, translation, and co-construction as a network or ecology of human and non-human actors and collaboration with those who are vulnerable and subject to hierarchical power dynamics. The practices and performances of actors in the 'spaces in between' stimulates rebalancing the knowledge-power nexus by distributing/sharing control, agency, and power. Course coordinator, tutors and students are curriculum performers since the design curriculum and pedagogy is "a process constructed by practising in a context of inter actions between human and non-human actors" (Corradi, Gherardi, and Verzelloni 2008, 8). As performers, they imagine alternatives, negotiate control and exercise agency to create a 'pluriverse' (Mignolo 2018) or a world of interconnected diversity where particular canons and ideas do not subsume and regulate others but is one of the many.

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