

Building the Post-Pandemic University

(In)Equality and (In)Justice

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Teaching Machines: platforms, pedagogies and the wicked problem of design thinking, a position statement

With the recent and ongoing mass protests of the *Black Lives Matter* movement, as well as the structural inequality surfaced by the Covid-19 Pandemic, it is, as ever, a matter of urgency for universities to transform their power relationships and practices, indeed, students are rightly vocal in their demand for decolonised, proactively anti-racist, not to say, emancipatory environments. Nationwide college strikes, as well as student and staff petitions at both the RCA and the University of the Arts in the Winter and Spring of 2020, further suggest current marketing models, those which wholly project the needs of business onto individuals, do not adequately match what many students want from universities. Examples of union-led platforms such as *Strike Radio* (zeno.fm, 2020) offer a counter to the neoliberal academy, premised on 'cross-solidarity' dialogue between different unions, students, local communities and university workers, as well as creative disturbance to the academic status quo. Strike Radio arguably represents a form of community-led radical pedagogy, a dialogic, change-focused radio station which runs counter to the 'digitally updated version of Eurocentric design doctrine and practice' in which 'Modernism has undergone a rebrand and today is marketed as "Design Thinking"' (Buzon, 2020). Despite the discontent represented by platforms such as Strike Radio, it seems the post-pandemic university is intent on wholly transferring its market ontology to a blended or online mode. As Lim et al stated in 2013:

The pedagogical implications are stark. Students are conceived of as "customers," or, more bafflingly, as "guests," as though universities were hotels or spas. They are theorized as consumers or co-producers of experiences which should be made as engaging as possible in order to promote loyalty and favourable word-of-mouth. Nowadays, the university is even regarded as some kind of business person or enterprise. Thus, increasingly we hear talk of the "entrepreneurial university," the "university-industry partnership" and so on, all pointing to the university as a site of commodification and marketization'(Lim et al, 2013).

In the midst of a pandemic and associated move to mass online learning, criticality, let alone critical or radical pedagogy (hooks, 1994, Giroux, 2011), is at risk within the neoliberal university, subsumed by a homogeneous free-market business ontology which frames subjects as entrepreneurial, enfolding us all in what we might call a 'hidden curriculum', where authority tacitly embeds sets of values and beliefs by way of ordered and structural procedures and routines (Aubrey, 2017:140). In the current pandemic, data-driven corporations are increasingly able to define for all of us what knowledge is; for them, the Covid-19 crisis is an opportunity to gain more control over the globalised 'episteme', making the realm of understanding ever more subsumed by a profit-at-all costs ideology, epitomised by the term 'Coronapreneurism' (Carosa, 2020). The entrepreneurial online

academy is supported by constructs such as *disruption, agility, Design Thinking* and *digital transformation*, further underpinned by techno-determinist belief in reductionist, 'universal' (as in white Western) design 'solutions'. From a techno-determinist position there is no need to address systemic power disparities or colonialism - the presumption is that technology can find an answer for everything and everyone, apart from, of course, the so-called 'wicked problems' (Rittel et al, 1973) of poverty and inequality. Post-pandemic, neoliberal Design Thinking constructs risk becoming ever more entrenched within Higher Education, naturalised by the domination of STEM/STEAM agendas, with their racist assumptions of 'universal' values and needs. As Ansari points out, Design Thinking universalism is synonymous with 'white, Eurocentric, settler logic' (Ansari, 2020), in which:

'Colonization, globalization, and 'development' (which design has played a large role in over the last century), have rendered many of these different ways of being in the world and being in relation to artifacts extinct or endangered; white supremacy and colonialism have attempted to 'flatten' and homogenize the world, partly precisely through claims to universalism, claims that have also supported neoliberal development and modernization' (Ansari, 2020).

As an academic in my mid 50s, the impact of market and Design Thinking ideology on universities is vividly and experientially evident. Since my own graduation in 1987, I've witnessed the transition of universities from sites of humanist (and therefore still problematic) learning with an emphasis on, albeit limited, critical academic imperatives, to sites of marketized, entrepreneurial subjectivity. Such entrepreneurship is deeply enmeshed within the domain of STEM and STEAM education, in which, in my experience, systemic criticality, let alone social justice, is largely suspended and a business ontology all but completely entangled with pedagogic goals. With Design Thinking comes a humanist construct of 'empathy' which fails to see its own systemic power relations. Humanism and its associated logic of human knowledge, is premised on *a priori* ontological separations between a 'context' and individuals, minds and bodies, between, for example, systems, objects and humans, nature and machines. The teaching of computer programming, logic and wider digital themes is also underpinned by the culturally homogenous teleology of the humanist STEM agenda, super charged by a neo-liberal business ontology in which teachers and students are defined by a precarious entrepreneurial market identity, within a trajectory of gig work and profit-at-all-costs capitalism. This aligns with top-down innovation rhetoric, 'universal' design thinking solutionism (Ansari, 2020, Morozov, 2013), venture capitalist employment 'disruption' and ecologically ruinous globalization. Ansari (2020) observes 'repeated claims, across many texts on 'fundamental' design principles, about how 'universal' design principles, theories, and methods are, or even that people are the same. This is something that underpins much of the claims for design thinking' (2020).

At the same time, the impact of the *Uberfication* of the university (Hall, 2016) cannot be underestimated (meaning the conversion of universities to Platform Capitalist business models), as well as the impact of Big Tech platforms such as Amazon, Google, LinkedIn, Pearson and now Zoom, who seek to dominate education, supported by a government in thrall to Big Data and the political affordances of online universities. In my previous experience as an online lecturer, working online fragments workforces, drives down wages

and degrades conditions, let alone the epistemic injustice of homogenous, dominating discourse and pedagogy. A double bind for me is that most of my own teaching is technologically focused, addressing computer programming and emergent technologies. Since Lockdown in the UK, all of our teaching has, by necessity, moved online. My background in digital technology and online learning might imply an adherence to the view that all knowledge can be symbolically formalised and flattened, and, at the same time, tethered to the needs of Big Tech corporations, in keeping with orthodox pedagogies implicated in so-called STEM and STEAM agendas. But the mainstream imperatives of STEM and STEAM are not reconcilable with social or Design Justice, or with a systemic understanding of power relations, they are neoliberal and atomising, representing the vested interests of an ultra-rich minority or hegemony, propping up an array of social injustices, not least of all systemic racism. Colucci-Gray et al remind us: 'STEAM builds upon the economic drivers that characterize STEM: an alignment of disciplinary areas that allegedly have the greatest impact on a developed country's Gross Domestic Product' (2019).

As a counter to neoliberal models of education, this position statement has presented a standpoint informed by the ongoing principles of Design Justice and a posthuman re-formulation of agency, eschewing universalist constructs of human knowledge, psychology or need; it questions structural forces of technology and avoids what McQuillan describes as the framing of 'society as categories of actuarial risk' in which people's lives are filtered through 'the epistemology of insurance and instrumentalism' (McQuillan, 2019). In particular, this statement critiques the colonial, not to say white supremacist, constructs which underpin 'Design Thinking', an approach to design and to design education which is still pervasive within UK and US Art and Design colleges and deeply embedded in the mainstream and emerging construct of online teaching platforms. My assertions are supported by an array of theorists and practitioners who critically challenge aspects of data driven pedagogy, Design Thinking and an algorithmic framing of knowledge, including Hall (2016) Selwyn (2016), Williamson (2016), Ansari (2020) and practitioners within the domain of computing and digital design, such as Benjamin (2019), Noble (2018), Irani (2015) and O'Neil (2016) as well as Costanza-Chock (2020), author of *Design Justice, Community-Led Practices to Build the Worlds We Need*. Design Justice is an evolving array of principals as well as an international group of people and organisations 'committed to rethinking design processes so they center people who are often marginalized by design' (designjustice.org); it is one of the growing number of movements which offer an alternative to the canon of Western design texts and premises.

It is almost impossible to imagine an imminent future in which chancellors turn to Design Justice and non-Western ideas in significant numbers, instead the risk is replication of the status quo via the 'byproducts of white supremacist capitalism that maintain its operations through a thinly veiled promise for visionary change' (Buzon, 2020). Having said that, I have seen the critical mass of staff and students who will not accept the status quo. *Strike Radio* is just one example of an alternative approach arising from this year's industrial action, one which evidences the way equality and justice could be centred in the post-pandemic university.

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