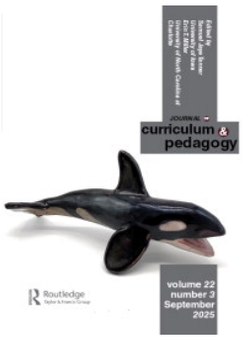

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'Design justice' and transformative pedagogy: Experiments in globally connected learning with the global classroom for democracy innovation

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ABSTRACT

The Global Classroom for Democracy Innovation (GCDI) explores the impact that critical design frameworks like 'design justice' can have on student experiences and capacity building. Positioning students and civil society partners as co-creators and co-designers, while designing spaces that invite lived experience and facilitate collaborative work, can offer new pathways to reanimate the higher education learning environment. These experiences, particularly when engaging with "wicked problems", can also be transformative. However, higher education systems, along with any intervening design frameworks, must be folded into an iterative praxis to ably support justice-oriented work. This paper is based on our experiences managing an internationally collaborative learning project spanning four continents and offers practical insights for educators interested in reimaging the function and form of higher education.

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Design thinking; critical pedagogy; design justice; global classroom; globally-networked learning environments

Introduction

"Being part of this project was the first time I have found a clear connection between my education and dealing with social issues practically, and with other like-minded people". These words, presented in an interview after participating in a Global Classroom event, both highlight the expectations students have for practical engagement with social issues, and the importance of co-design in education spaces. Through this paper, we offer reflections on how the Global Classroom for Democracy Innovation

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(GCDI) rethinks dominant pedagogical and design frameworks, and in doing so, creates possibilities for students to become "changemakers" through their time in tertiary education and beyond.

Higher education Institutions (HEIs) are increasingly under pressure to both prepare students for a rapidly changing and precarious economy and society more generally, while providing a transformative student experience (Morreira et al., 2020). Through a case study of the GCDI, a globally-collaborative educational project which spans four continents, this paper explores the potentialities of a transformative student experience that can be developed through a reimagining of internationally collaborative pedagogy. By drawing on experience from the management of the project over three years, supported qualitative data from student participants, coupled with autoethnographic data, we further highlight the value of a grounded, iterative praxis.

We begin by reviewing the contemporary turn to reframe "design thinking" as a critical design framework (Jamal et al., 2021), and the pathways emerging through praxis toward "design justice". We then explain the importance of engaging with "wicked problems" as an underlying component of creating transformative education experiences. Our case study of a particular Global Classroom iteration run in 2023 gives us insights into the value and challenges of engaging with civil society actors in the classroom space. We conclude with an overview of several additional areas in which the GCDI is undergoing continued experiments to refine our approach.

Critical reframing of design thinking

Design thinking as a framework, which moves from empathizing with users' needs, to ideate and iterate on project development, originated as a technical process. While traditional design thinking was participatory in nature, its end goal was typically profit driven, utilized mostly in corporate environments. Over time the field of design has seen a turn toward social purpose design. For example, scholars such as Manzini (2015) and Sasha Costanza-Chock (2020) have argued that a fundamental element of inclusive design is the creation of frameworks which empower marginalized communities in a way that meets *their* needs, as opposed to tokenistic inclusion. With specific focus on the underlying intention and framework rather than the outcome, we have situated our praxis in relation to such developments.

In "Designs for the Pluriverse" Arturo Escobar (2018) develops a critique of mainstream design frameworks, within which design thinking is situated. He argues that in the context of the wicked problem of climate change "humans are confronted with the irrefutable need to confront the design disasters [which led to this planetary crisis]" (Escobar, 2018, p. 7) and therefore makes a call for engaging in alternative modes of design across structural

and situated concerns. Escobar summarily highlights hegemonic design frameworks as central to the systems and structures of patriarchal, exclusionary, and unsustainable practice in contemporary society. Indeed, the frameworks of design which have been used largely for the benefit of the financially privileged, can (and should) be reanimated and repurposed (redesigned).

The GCDI is a cross-institutional collective of practitioners, scholars, and activists which brings students together to work on key global issues. Initiated in 2019 during the COVID pandemic, it aims to rethink extractive and eurocentric models of international student engagement, while creating collaborative communities of practice. This is situated in relation to global crowdsourcing platform Participedia and its focus on international collaborative praxis and knowledge sharing. As the GCDI brings together students from across the world in diverse teams to engage in the process of co-designing projects, by being attuned to the politics and power dynamics that embed these spaces, we aim to foster pathways aligned with design justice. Contesting the instrumental and reductionist roots of design frameworks, the GCDI centers a continued iteration on design as a field to make it more inclusive, drawing on design justice and equity frameworks (Figure 1). These frameworks aim to "Foresee the process as a product. Equity is a verb. It is a process, not an end point" (Equityxdesign, 2024). As will be engaged later, the focus on process, and not on product within the realm of HEIs more broadly, is a fundamental element of design justice. Furthermore, as we have used the GCDI as a space to explore possible pathways toward design justice, we recognize the role that the iterative and processual elements of such a project hold.

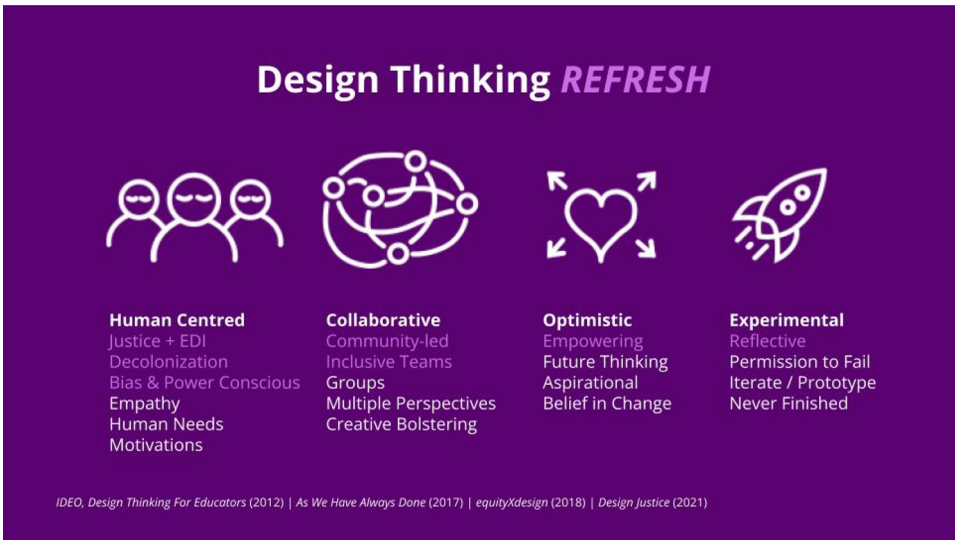

Figure 1. A content slide presented during the 2023 iteration of the GCDI, originally produced by the Vancouver Design Nerds, a founding partner organization of the GCDI.

Wicked problems as catalysts for transformation

The GCDI, a five-week internationally collaborative educational offering, locates its broad themes and design challenges given to students through the lens of wicked problems. We understand wicked problems to be borderless, complex challenges that require collaborative approaches to address (Czerniewicz et al., 2020; Head, 2022; Smith et al., 2022). Through our experiences as conveners of the GCDI, we illustrate how framing student project development in relation to a set of wicked problems that register both on an intellectual and personal level for students offers possibilities to transform the identities of student participants in a way that might precipitate social and political action.

Kari Grain, building on Freirean framework (Freire, 1970), operationalizes the theory of "critical hope" through seven core principles, one of which highlights the importance of witnessing social and historical trauma (Grain, 2022). She posits, "An education in difficult knowledge can shift identities, catalyze crises and shatter assumptions, and importantly to the notion of critical hope, it can intensify emotional and cognitive engagement with an issue so significantly that action becomes imperative" (Grain, 2022, p. 72). Through the various iterations of the GCDI, we have introduced evocative case studies of wicked problems including food security, climate change, racial justice among others. Beyond simply raising awareness of these issues, we observe in the space a clear shift in students' passion and excitement about the solutions they are co-designing, the ways they are collectively proposing to take action within these difficult spaces, which may have previously seemed insurmountable, or somewhat discouraged in higher educational contexts.

We view classrooms (in person or virtual) as microcosms reflective of larger systems and spaces where small scale changes can lead to downstream impact (Brown, 2017; Williams, 2021). The small-scale actions proposed by student groups through the GCDI are often both practical and possible, whether online or in different contexts physically. Co-design methods and tools rooted in design justice support this collaboration, and the GCDI incubates individual identity shifts through project-based learning that engages with wicked problems.

The wicked problems which frame the process of design throughout the GCDI shape how students develop their projects, and the feedback given throughout. Wicked problems, being inherently "borderless", do not negate the need of being attuned to varying contextual specificities, therefore inviting dialogue, lived experiences, and diverse knowledges of various global contexts into the space, knowing that everyone experiences wicked problems and their local manifestations differently, articulated through different experiences of social and historical trauma. We illustrate how we

bring participants' lived experience into the GCDI through the following case study.

Permeating academic borders: A case study in GCDI community engagement

HEIs can seem like impenetrable structures, separating their inhabitants from the outside world. Permeating these perceived borders was a common theme within the project outcomes of a more recent Global Classroom, held in October 2024, where we asked students to co-design forms of campus activism, connected globally. Even situated in diverse geographic contexts, nearly all the student projects culminated in some form of engagement between students and communities outside campus boundaries. From organized nature walks inviting students and community members to discuss the issues they care about most, to bolstering campus food security through partnerships with local farmers, the projects illustrated a desire for students to connect in meaningful ways with communities which co-constitute such places of privileged learning.

This search for connection beyond campus borders is not new to the GCDI. Our 2023 edition, the focus of this brief case study, included intentional partnership development with three civil society organizations: Climate Reality Canada, a national chapter of a global climate activism organization; Innovation for Policy Foundation (I4P), a policy change organization in Africa; and TNKVRT, a Swedish grassroots anti-racist group. In developing these partnerships, we aimed to disrupt the sometimes insular and academic-focused design of international collaborative learning spaces, while not isolating the design of student projects to take place solely between students in HEIs.

The GCDI team and our faculty partners drew on our own personal and research connections to community activists and organizations to ground collaborations from a place of trust. This required significant commitments to partner engagement, hosting conversations to better understand partners needs and co-draft a "design brief" document, which formed the basis of real-world project work in the GCDI. Community partners provided in-kind support through participation of organizers and staff in GCDI sessions involving direct engagement with students. In the GCDI sessions, each partner had 1 or 2 small groups of students working on their design challenge virtually. The community partners were invested in the process, participating in an interview/dialogue session with the groups working on their challenge, a mid-point review session, and the final presentation showcase.

The unique lived experience of student participants was given equal weight in the design process to the challenges being engaged. We dedicated

significant time in the discovery phase (see Wingfield et al., 2024) for student groups to get to know each other, sharing their passions and stories from communities they are embedded within and their own views on the issues at hand. Our design activities were arranged and facilitated to find points of connection between student group members and their civil society co-design partners, resulting in ideas for solutions that were completely unique, even when partners had more than one group working on the same design challenge.

TNKVRT's representative upon reflection said that, "all the inputs, ideas the teams produced and inspiration we have gained from speaking to such bright minded people are invaluable to us!". In a similar vein, a Climate Reality representative said that, "having this 'hive mind' of young, creative students was brilliant for producing unique solutions we hadn't considered before." With another partner stating how this process enabled them to reevaluate their "own ways of working and to experiment in how we think and talk about our programs". While community partners have been integrated into the GCDI framework in the past as guest speakers, joining the initial session and presenting on the work they do in different geographical locations (see Wingfield et al., 2024), the dialogical relationship throughout this 2023 iteration aligns more closely with an inclusive and participatory framework of design. The teams really got to know each other and were deeply invested in the results.

In addition to collecting reflections from our civil society partners, we were also interested in documenting how engagement with community partners on real world problems would affect student participants. To explore this, we supported two students in conducting a research study to track and analyze student responses to the 2023 iteration of the GCDI. Their research methods included a pre- and post-event survey, as well as post-event interviews with several student participants and facilitators. Through this process, we were able to observe that even for students who didn't self-identify as activists before going into the Global Classroom, the idea of small-scale action to make change was very compelling. Participants and facilitators alike commented that they hadn't considered small scale interventions as a pathway to larger scale change, and this was a motivating factor in the development of their projects.

Experiments in "just" student collaboration: Ongoing iteration of the GCDI

In addition to explorations in design justice and critical pedagogies, exploring wicked problems as a catalyst for transformation, and cultivating community partnerships outside of HEI's, the GCDI continues to reflect and iterate on our processes, in the following four areas:

Curricular & Co-Curricular engagement (flexible model)

The GCDI has been offered as part of courses in our partner institutions, in a co-curricular capacity, and independently from formal pedagogical offerings. Student feedback has shown that contrary to our assumptions that being part of the GCDI in relation to a course would correlate with more committed and enthusiastic engagement, the inclusive and collaborative nature of the co-design space was a differentiating factor. Therefore, both in the design and pedagogical spaces, participation and impact are largely dependent on fundamentally student oriented and inclusive frameworks. Students, in the critique of conventional learning spaces in HEIs, have amended how they engage and participate in these spaces (Alexander et al., 2021), while also opting in to courses and offerings that they find more adequately reflect what they might expect transformative educational spaces to be. The growing interest in the GCDI, and its continued reframing and iteration that happens within, but also outside of dominant educational frameworks, is indicative of such choices by students.

Nontraditional evaluation (Un-grading)

In the GCDI, we put particular focus on the experience of the co-design process and its impact on participants, rather than evaluating final projects. The five-week GCDI model takes students through the design process, as they develop a project with students from various partner institutions. At the end of the process, while students are required to present their projects, they do not receive a grade, but further prompts and feedback from the coordinating team and the community organizations they have worked with. Unlike the dominant HEI model of formative and summative assessments, the framing of design justice rather considers the capacities and competencies that have been fostered throughout the process of co-design (see Taylor, 2022). In this, the project not only aims to familiarize students with the developing frameworks of design, but prompt various other possibilities that transcend the timeline of the project. Student feedback from various iterations of the GCDI has led us to frame the outcome of the project rather as the development of student's potential to become "changemakers".

Intercultural competence

The impact of the GCDI has also been analyzed through the lens of intercultural competence (Punti & Dingel, 2021), which has been increasingly positioned as a key focus on HEIs globally. Intercultural competence is an inherently fundamental element of the GCDI, with students mainly from the Global South noting that before joining the GCDI they had few opportunities to interact with students from Global North HEIs. One of the partner institutions, the University of Toronto at Scarborough, has even

positioned the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) as an essential process of student internationalization. In an interview following the 2023 iteration of the GCDI, a student when prompted on the overall impact of the project stated, "I think the Global Classroom helped me especially with our project, think about practical, tangible ways of living things and working together with people in different countries". Further, a student who had been a participant as part of earlier iterations and later was hired as a facilitator argued that the interpersonal skills developed when working with people from internationally diverse backgrounds through the GCDI had transformed the way she was able to work in a collaborative setting. Being able to gain understanding of the situational, geographical, cultural, and psychosocial dynamics that make up different participant's lifeworlds (Behari-Leak, 2020) is a recurrent outcome of the GCDI.

Work integrated learning

In addition to creating civil society and community connections with students, we train student facilitators to bring real world experience into the GCDI. Students are expectant of being able to straddle academia and practical work (as is the premise of Work-Integrated Learning). Being nimble between these two sectors is further predicated on the possibility of being able to make a broader societal impact, as highlighted in the framework of "Pedagogies of Radical Democracy" (Poyntz & Ashworth, this issue). As a student facilitator from Sweden noted regarding the GCDI, "people that come in [and engage through the process of the GCDI], they have an idea of how to change society for the better", which brings both their academic training, and their co-curricular training through the GCDI into an iterative relationship. Particularly, the feedback received from students that became facilitators, as opposed to those that were participants in the GCDI, highlights the impact that different roles might have in being able to recognize and manage the interaction between a diverse set of students. In doing so, facilitators are key stakeholders in creating spaces that allow for diverse (if not at times opposing) worldviews and construct the co-design space that can impact students beyond the intellectual level.

Conclusion

Taking student perceptions and experiences as our primary starting point, the GCDI has continually iterated on its own processes, offering students a space to bring personal experience and lifeworlds into conversation with theoretical and technical instruction. We argue that design and pedagogy must continue to be (re)politicized and updated by engaging with the personal lifeworlds of students, engaging wicked problems and cultivating connections outside the confines of HEIs.

The GCDI frames the outcomes of collaborative learning expansively. Following the emerging praxis of design justice, it contributes to a broader framing of personal development and transformation. Moreover, the GDCI does not conceive of competency development as temporally mapped to a five-week course, but aims to position students to become changemakers, and in doing so, contributes to the perception and ability of students to address a wide range of issues at the local or international level, that are informed by but also go beyond formal educational engagements.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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