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Hall, Kimberly Ellen ORCID logoORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5544-8764> and Spooner, Tom ORCID logoORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3435-7908> (2025) Cooking Up Assignments Together: Illustrators Approach Decolonising the Studio-Classroom. In: Innovations in Decolonising the Curriculum: Multidisciplinary Perspectives. Emerald Publishing Limited, pp. 137-151. ISBN 9781836089148

Official URL: <https://doi.org/10.1108/978-1-83608-912-420251012>

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/978-1-83608-912-420251012>

EPrint URI: <https://eprints.glos.ac.uk/id/eprint/15890>

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Cooking Up Assignments Together: Illustrators Approach Decolonising the Studio-Classroom

Abstract:

Beginning with the idea that decolonising the curriculum is about more than just wider participation and inclusion, we will address how, through a more experiential and heuristic approach to learning, students can develop the confidence to deal with complex and sensitive real-world issues. Central to this is a consideration of authorship, which is the privilege and responsibility for authoring images and stories in illustration practice. This means questioning what it means to place the student's own experience at the forefront of their research, as well as how the budding illustrator-researcher may begin to acknowledge and utilise their own privilege (or lack of), subjectivity, and socio-cultural biases within the production of work. Through discussion of assignments set across first and second year undergraduate study, we will address how these self-reflective, action-based activities can be used to deconstruct, and subvert, traditional top-down pedagogic hierarchies, and evolve into meaningful and rigorous outward-facing academic research and illustrative practice.

Preamble

This chapter is the result of a conversation between two lecturers on a BA Illustration course in a UK Higher Education institute in Gloucestershire, England. Including responses to a significant curriculum redesign from our student body, it reflects on how we have built a progressive approach to critical practice into our teaching. Our position is that decolonisation is about removing structures, formats, and rules that come from outside of active artistic practice.

Introduction: Feelings, how we started

Discussion between people helps bring understanding —First year student

Kimberly Ellen Hall: When we began the curriculum redesign for our course over the 2021-2022 academic year, one of my goals was to develop modules that built upon each other and helped students move progressively toward deeper critical understandings of their work. We needed to start where students are when they join the course, and most of our students didn't have strong traditional academic skills in reading and writing, but they were highly skilled in image-making. That kind of visual knowledge, which is predicated on technical and critical skills, is still sometimes undervalued (Busch 2009), so the question for us became how to support students find ways to value their unique strengths.

*[I]t's almost a different style of learning in that we form opinions and discuss with others and then form new ones. There seems to be much less right and wrong...
—First year student*

Tom Spooner: A key concern for me as an educator, has always been engaging students with a broader sense of what illustration can do. With a relatively new but burgeoning research culture, illustration is a discipline that presents many exciting opportunities for addressing and redressing complex world issues without the input of a client or commissioning agent (Male, 2019). For the illustrator to be engaged in meaningful and rigorous real-world research, this might mean drawing from the tried and tested methods of other disciplines, such as the social sciences. It might also involve unpacking, critically, the role we play as author and disseminator of the work, or philosophically, the content of our own lived experiences and subjectivity and how this informs our creative process.

KEH: The role of authorship in illustration is something we ask students to consider in our modules, and it's relevant for us too as we write this chapter. Joining our course in 2021, I found a student population that was mostly White, often first-generation in higher education, and a course team that was mostly new to the university. I joined from an art school that was in a majority Black city in the United States with a majority White faculty and a diverse, but mostly non-local student population. My teaching and professional development there led me to educators and scholars like Paolo Freire and bell hooks, and also to practitioners like Lynda Barry, all of whom helped me centre liberatory practice in

my teaching methods. Coming to our course just at the end of the pandemic, I wanted to reconsider how we might rebuild teaching practice within the course.

TS: It's true, most of our students are White-British, but there are many other factors, such as social-economic background, sexuality, and neurodivergence that affect how they see the world. One of my greatest joys, as an educator, is learning from the wealth of experiences and knowledge that students bring to the classroom. However, getting students to acknowledge the value of their own life experiences, particularly in relation to their developing artistic practices, can be challenging. A further concern for me then, when it came to developing modules, was facilitating learning experiences that enabled students to engage with the theory being presented but also helped them to channel their personal experiences and beliefs into the creation of original outward-facing research.

What is decolonising? Our experiential and heuristic approach

*Theory/Critique spoke a lot about taking care of myself as an artist and human....—
Third year student*

KEH: The outer leaf I instinctively reach to pull back first is about expectations and what we understand decolonising to be in our course. As mentioned above, we don't have a very racially diverse student body, so it would be easy for staff to presume that decolonising isn't relevant for us. Decolonising means making space for viewpoints, systems, and practices that are local, not imposed from elsewhere (Horton/Friere 1990). So often in life we are expected to follow rules, guidelines, formats; systems that have been designed outside of our own lived experiences. Co-creating with students, valuing all that they bring, and following their lead in our projects has been integral to the decolonisation of our course. Liberatory practice and action teaching (Plous 2017) have been central to how I approach this work.

There is an expectation by students that there is a right way and a wrong way, or a good way and a bad way to work, usually cemented in previous education experiences that can be difficult to get away from. One of the aspects of decolonising work that I am most interested in is challenging this binary approach to learning. Foregrounding different ways of knowing sounds deceptively simple, but it can be challenging for students to see this until we begin to hold critiques and look at each other's work.

....being able to discuss topics that in most cases branch into philosophy, teaching and writing, so not just art. Which I believe is good to keep our minds open and refreshed on topics (such as human rights) and it helps me think what else can I do with this education. —First year student

TS: Whilst I've been aware of the idea for some years, being honest, I can't say I've truly confronted the notion of 'decolonising the curriculum' head-on, until now. Like many others, I would argue there is a danger in simply, 'side-lining white academics or 'traditional' scholarship due to its 'Western' origins" (Mehmood & Chaudry, 2020). But, on the purpose of scholarship, and what this means in practice, McKenzie Wark (2020) in her book, 'Sensoria', provides an explanation that certainly resonates here. The common task of scholarship, she says, ought not to be about reaching some universally agreed consensus on how the world is, but seeing the value in exploring different ways of seeing and knowing it, so that we might come to a better understanding, or recognise the limits, of our own.

KEH: This idea of knowing speculatively and provisionally is so central to our approach to teaching this course. One of the first changes I instigated was reformulating all the first-year modules to be pass/fail instead of the standard letter grade. This was important in moving students to focusing on the work itself, rather than the grade at the end. It was generally supported by the Academic Quality team at the time because grades for first year undergraduates do not contribute to the overall qualification. There was some concern about the transition from non-grading in the first year to letter grades in the second. We tackled this through a process of self-grading, as described below.

Steps toward 'ungrading' are necessary for decolonisation because it allows students to work outside of lecturer-imposed practices much more freely and to start taking greater ownership of their own work. Ungrading refers to any number of techniques teachers might employ to shift student focus away from numbers and letters and instead keep them on the work at hand. This helps students build a critical perspective as they make decisions on what work is successful or well done. Grading is a policy that teachers create, it's not a fact of life, and we should question it, and bend or break it when necessary (Blum and Kohn 2020).

In my own grappling, self-grading became a tool that I could wield in my explorations of decolonisation. Using a matrix of learning outcomes and marks, students are asked to respond to it and formulate their own grades on the work they are submitting. Staff then add their

marks to the matrix which is shared back to students when work is returned. This work is ongoing. Our next step will be to co-create matrices and learning outcomes with the students, instead of imposing them on students by teaching staff. This is important in our decolonising efforts as students should be able to determine learning outcomes that feel relevant to them.

We start talking to students about our approach as soon as they start the course, firstly in the module I teach called Theory/Critique (T/C), which will be my focus in this chapter. With an experiential approach to teaching at its heart, this module uses tools like a 'commonplace book' (SS 2021) and the 'sketchnoting' system of note taking (Rohde 2022) to interrogate critical readings through visual and active drawn methods (Carney 2021).

TS: In a similar vein, I'll focus on a second-year module I teach called Practice as Research (PaR) - which is intended to build on T/C. Through a series of self-contained briefs, this module introduces transferable approaches to self-initiated research. Its focus is as much on looking inward, (i.e. our students reflecting on their own values and life experiences), as it is outward, as we begin important conversations around how the sort of work they do on the module might fit within wider scholarly discussions and professional practice.

Scholarship - Privilege

KEH: Both T/C and PaR are meant to lead students to the Research/Dissertation module, which is the apex of critical inquiry in our course. Our students told us that they were not excited about developing a dissertation, and we learned some of that is because of the rigid structures of academic writing and research. Imposing unfamiliar and formal outsider systems can be disheartening and it can keep students from engaging with the deeper ideas that they are very much capable of exploring.

TS: I agree and in response to this, I think it's important to embed and nurture critical thinking throughout the course. Teaching the second years, I start with some fundamental questions around what illustration is, and the position of power that the illustrator inherently assumes when producing work for the purpose of visual communication. PaR begins with a project called, 'Data Visualisation'. The fact that Illustration might be used to explain aspects of a data sample, for example, in the form of graphs or infographics, is our starting point. However, the actual aim of this project is to begin thinking about the role that

illustration can play, not only in representing abstract information, but also in constructing new knowledge in the process – in a way that is more-or-less unique to the discipline.

We begin the project with a group discussion of a series of illustrations. Here, with reference to ‘constructivist’ models of learning, we consider instances where illustrators, historically, have ‘assimilated’ and ‘accommodated’ data (Piaget, 1977) to produce work that went on to inform or advance scientific, cultural, and political discourses of their time. One example is an 1844 painting depicting a group of Native American warriors enacting a ritualistic scalp dance. The warriors dance in a circle, their bodies contorted. Some brandish spears with human scalps swinging from their tips. A number of the figures look outwards from the circle, their faces smeared with blood, engaging the viewer with fierce, trance-like expressions. Purporting to record actual events happening in the Americas at the time, discussion regarding whether this is a piece of factual documentary or racist propaganda ensues.

KEH: Students and young people often don’t think of themselves as being in a position of power at all. Building an understanding of places of power and privilege through illustration allows them to start to recognise those moments outside of their art practices.

[I] used to find in-class discussion very intimidating but I have really enjoyed how the class environment feels here. Allows me to feel like I actually have something worth saying/adding. —First year student

In T/C when we read hooks’ chapter, ‘On Language’ in *Teaching to Transgress* (1994), we do a workshop about ‘not knowing’ where we go to a local spot for graffiti and investigate tags and lettering that we do not understand. Students are asked to explore hooks’ concepts, not in writing, but by drawing and investigating images that they don’t understand in our neighbourhood. The practical task of redrawing images requires a step-by-step analysis that we might think of in an academic way (identification, exploration, investigation, analysis and output) but instead, these steps are enacted through creative practice: exploring the images on the wall, looking at/investigating the graffiti to determine which one we don’t understand, analysing the selected piece by redrawing it, and discussing the final drawing/output in class at the end.

TS: The idea of ‘not knowing’ plays a central role in a field trip I lead to the Oxford Pitt

Rivers Museum. This ethnography museum is well-known today for its vast collection of human-made artefacts, whose origins and meanings have been lost or obscured due to historical colonial injustices, including, mishandling and racist labelling of this data. A bid to correct this is at the forefront of the museum's own agenda today, but when so much has been lost to history, this is clearly not a straightforward task.

The brief for this assignment requires students to analyse, interpret, and visualise a worldview, an 'ontological position', contained within an object they discover at the museum, that is, a belief system or way of seeing the world held by the object's creator. Primary research commonly provides access to valuable first-hand data, and it exposes us to new ideas we might not experience otherwise. But, in the case of places like the Pitt Rivers Museum, one is confronted with a such an array of complex, sensitive, and sometimes conflicting information – and in instances, a lack of information. For the illustrator, as decoder and disseminator of this data, apprehending this as a most privileged position, (albeit with much ethical burden), is not hard.

An article on the museum's blog reports that it's involved in a 'deconstructionist shift' (Borm, 2021). Ahead of the trip, through group discussion, we unpack 'deconstruction' as a viable critical process for the illustrator, that is, the idea that there is not one single meaning or truth to be found within an object, but many possible interpretations regarding its origins and purpose (e.g. why it was made, what it means, and to who) (Derrida, 1976), and the possible implications for the illustrator who must work with a combination of empiricism, historical facts, and imagination, to fill in the gaps.

This discussion naturally leads on to talking more specifically about what a decolonised approach to deconstructing the museum's collection might look like, and the value of implementing such an approach. Through looking at labels previously shown beside objects in the museum, which used adjectives such as 'primitive' or 'savage', we can see that how we gain knowledge about the world has the potential to be grounded in culturally-specific worldviews that are antagonistic towards other (no less valid) knowledge systems that exist outside of what is given (Arshad, 2021).

Authorship - Bias

KEH: The issues that you are asking students to deal with here are supported by activities and learning undertaken in first year. In T/C they author and illustrate a zine about someone on campus, and we use the Liberatory Design Deck (Anaissie et al 2021) as a tool to scaffold

their explorations in telling someone else's story. The modes and mindsets the deck offers help students begin to examine how to work with others, particularly as subjects. It has a series of cards with prompts that we use in our first pass of making a zine about someone in the class.

Terms in the deck like “Exercise Creative Courage” and “Take action to Learn” help students see how they must be active participants in the work they do, whereas ones like “See the System” and “Inquire” emphasise taking time to really look and explore their subject matter. The card for “Empathize” ties to the position of power they must grapple with as the author, whereas the card for “Prototype” offers them a tool to chip away at their understanding and allow for growth in their process.

T/C also influenced me in the way that I think about how to approach briefs in a different way to how I normally would. —Second year student

TS: This makes me think about a second project I run called, ‘Adaptation & Interpretation’, which is very much about students embedding their own authorial consciousness within the creation of original artwork, but by using the work of others as a starting point. Here, using ceramics, students are instructed to flesh out a creative response to a piece of poetry (from a selection) that deliberately eschews conventional literary analysis, (i.e. looking for universally agreeable meanings), in favour of bringing their own beliefs, experiences, and meanings to the text.

At first I was unsure about what the module was about/expected us to do but as time went on we explored different practices in drawing, for example drawing from memories and our own experiences. —Second year student

With reference to Roland Barthes' essay, ‘The Death of the Author’, we first discuss the notion of a ‘text’ being applicable to any cultural output, (e.g. visual art, music, architecture etc.), where meaning arises through interaction with signs, symbols, and codes, rather than direct engagement with the creator's original purpose (Barthes, 1977). The purpose of this is to initiate discussion around those without power challenging so-called, ‘grand narratives’, and exploring this as a legitimate form of scholarship. Of course, the entire history of art and design, and how it has evolved through the ages, is filled with examples of artists who challenged the status quo. However, in the mid-late-twentieth century, particularly in

postmodern and post-structural discourses, we see the salient agenda was a breaking down of long-standing power imbalances and inequalities prevalent within elitist, often male-dominated institutions, including, the art establishment itself. Responding to poetry, I find, is an interesting entry point for this exercise, not only because it naturally evokes images and ideas that elude objective interpretation, but also, for some of our students, it is perceived as an unfamiliar medium that itself is a reserve of the cultural elite.

Subversion - Hierarchy Deconstruction

KEH: The relationship between author and reader in Barthes is a great transition to thinking about subversion in the classroom.

*I try to just do what feels natural to me, rather than what I think is expected of me.
I'm still working on trusting my own artistic process. —Second year student*

One of our first projects in T/C is to get familiar with the library. We explore points of view and power dynamics with our subject librarian Rachel Reid, who helped me develop this exercise. Each student must choose a book in the library to illustrate a cover for, but they are also asked to choose a second book on the same subject to serve as a counterpoint. This intersection of books helps them subvert their ideas about a chosen topic and consider the 'dangers of a single story' (Ngozi Adichie 2010).

Each year I also run a project called the Big Brief. In the most recent run of the module, I had a session centred around deciding what the brief should be, what we were trying to learn from it, and how to develop it. Students decided that they wanted to make a collaborative comic, and we explored how developing this project together would cover some key concepts for authorial practice. Creating this as a student-led project shifts the work away from the teacher, and allows students to work autonomously, away from top-down hierarchies, subverting the usual teacher-student relationship. The full briefs for these projects can be found in the appendix.

TS: Some of these ideas present themselves, and are built upon, in a final project I run called, 'Social Engagement'. Here, students must work in teams to produce work that responds to a real-world issue through direct engagement with the places and people affected. Last year, exploring the topic of conservation, we went on a trip to the Forest of Dean, which involved

interviewing Forestry England team members. Findings from the trip were then used to produce outcomes addressing issues we encountered there.

This project is multi-faceted in its approach to rethinking real-world power dynamics. First, it's an opportunity for students to think about dissolving barriers between themselves and their audience by making artwork that targets and involves the contributions of local communities, primarily, through direct participation (Bishop, 2012). Secondly, it considers the usefulness of lived experience and ethnographic practices in the gathering of meaningful primary data relating to specific world issues, rather than relying purely on information fed to us in the classroom or through other top-down systems (e.g. news and media outlets). Finally, encompassing notions of 'grassroots activism' and 'citizen journalism', which are inherently subversive in themselves, it instigates thinking about professional practice outside of the top-down hierarchy of working for a commissioning client (Embury & Minichiello, 2018).

Increasingly, in a way that subverts traditional illustration teaching, (i.e. where the freelance illustrator, essentially, works as a gun for hire in a highly competitive corporate industry), illustrators are earning a living as free agents. Indeed, funding is available for artists involved in meaningful, community-focused work. Often, as is the case with charitable bodies like Arts Council England, it's the artist's responsibility to identify where the work is needed and what it should look like, not an external commissioning agent.

Mine [dissertation] is very much impacted by who I am and the position I hold on the topic so it's a balancing act between object/subjectivity. —Third year student

KEH: Exploring the balancing act of perspective is part of a two-part workshop I run called Systems/Creativity. Students must draw a still life in class but also write down a continuous record of each decision they make as they draw. Then, the next week, students are presented with the same still life along with the list of actions that they took last time. But now they aren't allowed to do any of the actions on their list, they must creatively discover new ways to work with the set up. Ultimately, being asked to confront and circumvent rules or ideas about what is a right or wrong decision, they end up producing exciting new work. They are only trying to find something interesting to do that they haven't done before, and, as you say, that's a skill they can use to move forward from their education and make a living with.

Thinking about where ideas come from or exploring contexts that I wouldn't normally go for. —Third year student

Conclusions: How are we moving forward?

I love the freedom to take the conversation anywhere, and the class discussions about what different meanings we found in the texts. —First year student

KEH: Looking forward in our teaching practice necessitates some looking back as well. We need to consider what does it mean to measure our success? I think that's a real question for a chapter about practice-based methods of decolonisation. Teaching and learning are for both students AND teachers (Hall, 2022) and while reflecting on students' developments is key, we must also discuss our own experience of teaching on these modules.

Making space for students to contribute to my teaching has led me to practical efforts like rewriting briefs to become more understandable (the Systems/Creativity brief for example), but also to consider the nature of lecturer 'enthusiasm' with my students and where feelings come from in the classroom. Working with you, Tom, and the rest of the teaching team, has also influenced my teaching. Having a community of colleagues to develop teaching methods with has been challenging and exciting. It has meant I also have to practice the key concepts in T/C I mention above, like Systems & Selection, Authorship, Care, Productivity, Joy.

TS: Some good thoughts to conclude on. Leading the third year Research/Dissertation module, I have the privilege of seeing the fruits of our labours in first and second year. As this module has grown since the course rewrite, I have witnessed some profound leaps being taken by students – both in their critical thinking and in their ability to tap-in to timely real-world issues. Particularly worthy of mention, I feel, are those that have allowed details from their personal lives to become the focus of sustained and in-depth research. These projects have been empowering for our students, and they show the value that illustration can have in shedding light on and elucidating issues that might not already receive due attention within mainstream media.

Looking back at the steps we've taken to decolonising our curriculum, these bear little resemblance to my initial conceptions on what this process might actually entail. However, the work has been invaluable for ensuring the continued currency of our course, from an

academic standpoint, and in terms of aligning with a wider international move towards a fairer world. This has not always been easy. In fact, I would like to echo some of our students' feedback here and add that sometimes it has been hard to see the bigger picture, that is, how everything we teach on the course fits together and meets with a shared vision. Sometimes, it can feel easier just to fall back on what we know already or how we were taught at university ourselves, but having this conversation, I am excited about continuing to grow this work.

Theory/Critique helped me to try and not always aim for perfection. It taught me that it's okay to make a mess or go too far sometimes. It's all about experimenting! While I didn't always enjoy every aspect of Practice as Research or Theory/Critique they were important in taking my practice to the level that it is now. —Third year student

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Appendix

See separate files for possible appendices.