

Envisioning a pluriversal design education

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Vestiges of the curricula at the Bauhaus and the Hochschule, Ulm, the former designed in the 1920s, and the latter created in the 1950s, can still be seen in design curricula around the world. These curricula focused on the craft of design and were very tied to large industrial economies. More traditional design curricula born out of the Bauhaus and Ulm, focused on graphic and product or industrial design. The design community has placed several calls to re-imagine a future design education. This contribution shares several sketches of design curricula driven by pluriversal issues, epistemologies and ontologies, and not created as a recreation of what already existed. These explorations were created, over several years, as responses to needs of people in the Caribbean and Latin America. One image looks at design education from people from most 'vulnerable' countries, using definitions by the United Nations. Another looks at empowering and liberatory design education, building on critical pedagogy principles of Freire and Shor. A third image looks at a design curriculum through a decolonial lens. A fourth image examines the skills that design education could foster. While a fifth image explores a design curriculum that celebrates a pan-African identity. While none of these sketches is a complete curriculum, each is an invitation to other educators to challenge existing paradigms of design education and to create relevant curriculum for diverse audiences. While these curricular experiments are built around the experiences of people from the Global South, these curricula, based by different epistemologies may also provide some insights into what might be missing from design curricula in the Global North.

Decolonial curriculum, pluriverse, design education

Introduction

In this informal paper, I am sharing a thought experiment that I've been running for several years. It started with a quote by a well-known design researcher, Prof. Ken Friedman:



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Since most design professions involve shaping goods and services within large industrial economies, this political-economic context is one key to the realities of design education today and tomorrow” (Ken Friedman, 2012)

In this statement, Prof. Ken Friedman (2012) tied the political and social contexts of design education to large industrial economies. This, to me, seemed to challenge the validity and the relevance of design practice and design education outside of these types of contexts. Something about that phrase jumped out at me and made me think, ‘but wait, I’m a designer from a tiny dot in the Caribbean, not from a large industrialized country. What about me? I practiced design and I taught design, at a tertiary level. Isn’t design practiced outside of large industrialized contexts? Doesn’t design education exist in these places? Isn’t what I do also design?

While many design professions and design schools may operate within large economies, I’ve often wondered what design education should look like for someone from a small non-industrialized context? How can design and design education in these places use, like the athletics program in Jamaica, their varied culture and contexts to create relevant design curriculum to serve their populations? How do we create a global view in design education that is not a hegemonic Western view, and a repeat of curricula from the West?

The 100th year of the Bauhaus was celebrated in 2019. It is considered by many to be the start of formal design education. The Bauhaus was founded in 1919 by the Prussian architect Walter Gropius, as a new form of craftsman’s guild, where students were assigned to workshops to learn crafts (Wainwright, 2019). The slightly less well-known Ulm School of Design closed its doors in 1968. Both curricula have influenced design education, particularly graphic design, industrial design and architecture, significantly and their influence can still be felt in many places around the world.

The Hochschule für Gestaltung (HfG) Ulm was founded in 1953 and operated in Ulm, Germany, till 1968. The HfG Ulm had four departments – Product Design, Visual Communications, Industrial Building and Information – which later became Film (Jacob, 1988). The school was rooted in socialism, The program at Ulm was more multi-disciplinary than the Bauhaus program and included subjects such as sociology, psychology, writing, graphic design, product design and architecture.

A long time ago, I used to think it was nice to be able to recognize some foundational exercises whenever I visited a design school in another country. So I’ve recognized some of the same design exercises in Brazil, at the National Institute of Design, in Bangalore, in Trinidad, where I taught for many years, and in North Carolina where I did my PhD. These days I find myself asking more? How could this be more different.

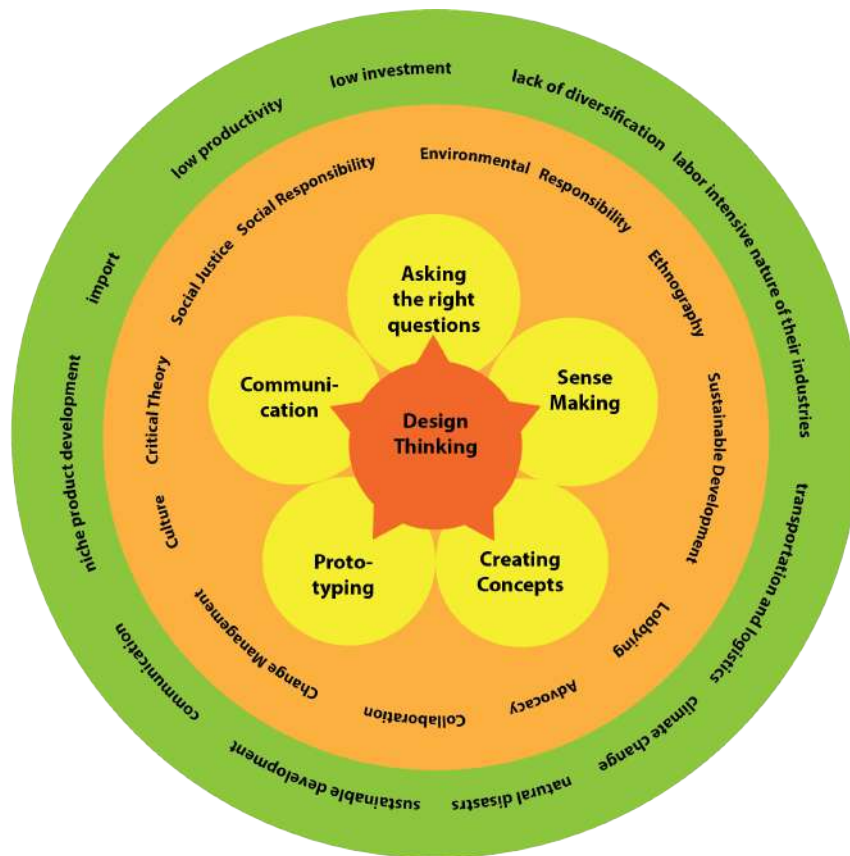
I’ve explored several variations of design curricula that are not inspired by the Bauhaus or Ulm. I share these in the following paragraphs. The curricula are described in words, and also presented as images.

1. A curriculum for ‘vulnerable’ economies

I created my first visual design curriculum experiment (Fig. 1) in Figure 1, in 2014 as a response to Prof. Friedman’s assertion that design served large industrialized economies. In developing this curriculum after reading Friedman’s article I began to think about what economies might be the smallest and least industrialized, and what could go into a design curriculum in this context. The United Nations defines the most vulnerable countries as Landlocked Developing countries, Small Island Developing States and there’s a category called Least Developed Country (UN-OHRLLS, 2014). The cultural and social contexts in LLDCs, LDCs and SIDSs can be so different from more industrialized contexts that the questions in a design curriculum for any of these places should have a different starting point. Given the challenges

faced in developing countries, especially those of LLDCs, LDCs and SIDS, in addition to those skills, design education in the developing world also requires a strong base in the social sciences in areas such as: social and environmental responsibility; anthropology and ethnography; sustainability; culture; behavioral sciences; change management and entrepreneurship as well as skills relating to advocacy, lobbying and collaborating with the public sector, since in many of these places the government agencies are not yet aware of how design can support their countries' development.

I started with some core design abilities that improved design practice, such as learning to ask the right questions, making sense of information, creating concepts, prototyping, and communicating ideas (Moratsky, 2016). These I presented in the petals of the flower, around the central concept of 'design thinking', which should not be confused with the codified design thinking process. In the center I was referring to the 'way that designers think. In the orange ring, I identified other fields and skills that we draw on to do good design work, such as ethnography, sustainable development, environmental responsibility, critical theory and change management. In the outer circle, I identified major economic and social issues in LLDC, LDCs and SIDs. To make a case for locally developed curricula instead of what sometimes obtains where people will borrow the curriculum developed in another context.



Center: Design Thinking
 2nd ring: Key skills of designers
 3rd ring: Additional skills in the social sciences required by designers in the LDS, LLDCs and SIDS
 4th ring: Problems faced by LDCs, LLDCs and SIDS.

Figure 1. Design curriculum for Least developed countries, Small island developing states and Land locked developing countries. Noel 2016

2. Empowering Design Curriculum

I developed the following visual curriculum for my doctoral fieldwork with children in Trinidad. The aim of the curriculum was to provoke critical discussions, helping the students to identify challenges and take action through design. Merely critiquing society and analyzing problems can be depressing, and this is what design (influenced by Industrial Design) brings to this equation. The active element of design thinking where children or participants propose and sometimes make solutions to problems means that the critique of systems does not remain depressing and overwhelming, and the discussion can become empowering for people who may have thought that they could not influence change. The curriculum was also used in Puerto Rico by Dr. O'Neill with her students in Puerto Rico (Noel & O'Neill, 2018).

The curriculum is student-centered in keeping with Freire's approach to pedagogy that utilized the experience of students and showed respect for their knowledge, culture, and language (Peterson, 2003). It combined Critical Utopian Action Research and Shor's principles of empowering education (1992). The CUAR framework connects critiques to utopian ideas and action with local stakeholders around critical questions such as *what's wrong?*, and questions that lead to utopian action such as *where would we like to go?* and *how can our dreams become a reality?* (Husted & Tofteng, 2015, Nutti, 2016). Shor (1992) proposed a framework for empowering education that encouraged students to become thinking citizens, change agents and social critics. He proposed that empowering pedagogy must be participatory, affective, problem-posing, situated, multicultural, dialogic, desocializing, democratic, researching, interdisciplinary and activist.

In drawing this version of the curriculum, I wanted to challenge the rigidity of a circular format and created this somewhat hand-drawn sketch (inspired by a doodle on Pinterest) where the design process of this curriculum focuses on three main questions from Critical Utopian Action Research are surrounded by Shor's principles of empowering education

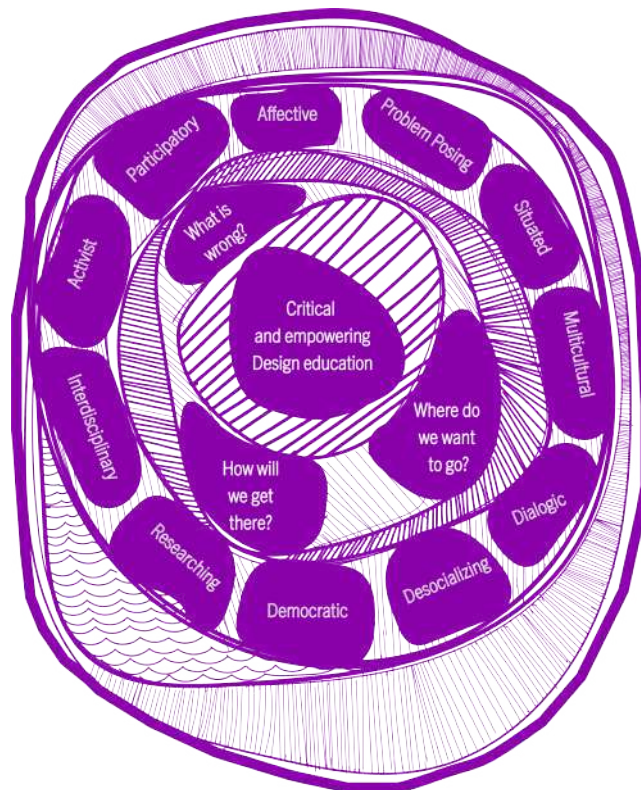


Figure 2. Empowering design education. Source: Noel 2020

3. A decolonial design curriculum

The third curriculum study draws on the work of the scholars Escobar, Mignolo and Santos (2013) to create principles for a pluriversal design syllabus.. This work focuses on decoloniality and pluriversality. This curriculum emphasizes Responsive Design Practice , Radical Decoloniality, Critical Making , Resilience and Change , Knowledge as Emancipation, Critical Utopias and Dystopias, Community as Educator, Unlearning Oppression , Understanding our Worlds, Intentional Listening and Seeing, Critical Design Thinking, Localization and Globalization, Anti-hegemonic knowledge and non-Western Worlds.

This curriculum responds to Santos’s (2013) calls for epistemologies of seeing and of absent knowledges by promoting ‘knowledge diversity’ and a culture of ‘noticing’ through courses like ‘localization & globalization’, ‘responsive design practice’, ‘community as educator’ and ‘Intentional listening and seeing’. The course titled ‘Knowledge as Emancipation borrows the term directly from Santos’ text (2013, p. 156), giving the curriculum an emancipatory underpinning.

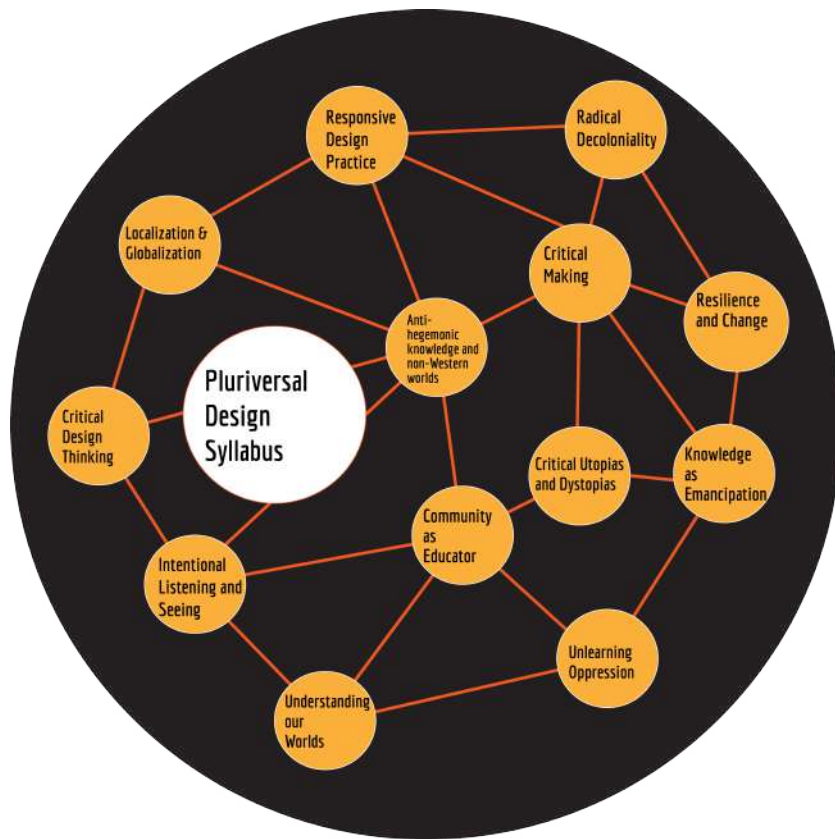


Figure 3. A pluriversal Design curriculum inspired by Santos, Escobar and Mignolo.

4. A curriculum around design mindsets and 21st century skills

In this fourth image I was exploring the guiding principles for a non-outcomes-based approach to design education, where the focus is on social and psychological development and the development of what are called by some ‘21st century skills’. These 21st century skills include “learning and innovation skills, critical thinking and problem solving, communications and collaboration skills and digital or ICT literacy” (Trilling & Fadel, 2009). This design curriculum is a response to the recognition on many levels of the

inadequacies of current education paradigms in developing 21st century skills and predictors of student success such as a growth mindset (Noel & Liu, 2016).

The focus of this curriculum would be, through design, to build the skills of Flexibility, Empathy, Creativity, Facilitation, Grit, Collaboration, Problem solving, Resourcefulness, Resilience, Experimentation, Comfort with discomfort, Future Focus, Curiosity, Openness. When people ask ‘why design’ I often draw on these principles to respond. Design education through its pedagogies, methods and processes already develops many of these skills.

In addition to meeting traditional education demands, design principles in children’s education, such as empathy, collaboration and facilitation, human-centeredness, and creativity by iterations of prototyping and testing, will provide a sound base for children not only seeking to enter a design profession in the future but moving into any profession in the future and will lead to higher engagement at school and greater success in life.

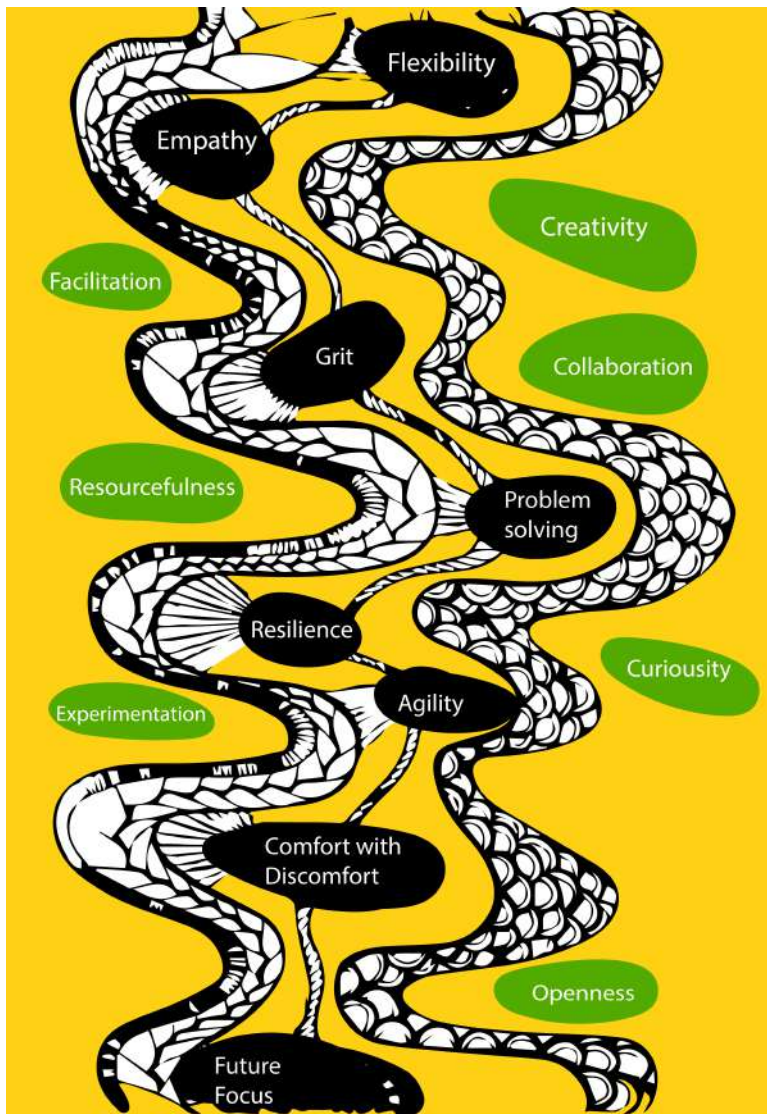


Figure 4. A design curriculum with a focus on building 21st century skills

5. A pan African design curriculum

The final image in the presentation is an experiment of a pan African culturally relevant (design) curriculum. In this image, the principles or courses are: Imagining Black futures, Narrative and Storytelling, Serving my community, Constructive heritage, Positionality matters, Resilience and Change, Wellness and the African experiment, Challenging Stereotypes, Pan African ethnography, Africans and the environment, Liberatory Design and making, Ancient and Modern technologies

This experiment was created as part of my own response to the racial unrest in the United States, and the murder of George I have however wondered for several years about how a social design curriculum would look through an emancipatory and liberatory lens, created by black and brown people for black and brown audiences. Pluriversal design education will look different if it is approached by people who see themselves as inside or outside of the center. So this could be an example of design education ‘by us for us’. This is a conscious nod to the disability civil rights movement’s phrase “Nothing About us Without Us”. Social design often focuses on the needs and challenges of black and brown communities, and it often does this through a white lens, where white students and academics focus on the communities. This curriculum imagines courses for a Black audience, and includes a focus on hope, wellness, positionality and futures.



Figure 5. A Pan-African design syllabus that focus on inspiring African people. The courses might include: Imagining Black Futures; Narratives and Storytelling; Serving my community; Constructive Heritage; Wellness and the African Spirit; Positionality Matters; Resilience and Change; Challenging Stereotypes; Pan-African Ethnography; Africans and the Environment; Liberatory Thinking and Making and Ancient and Modern Technology.

6. A Utopian New Design Curriculum

After presenting these sketches to the audience at Pivot 2020, I challenged the audience to imagine the courses they would like to see in a new 21st century pluriversal design curriculum. Twenty-nine members of the audience (named at the end of this paper) contributed over 50 suggestions of courses to the discussion via the chat window in the Zoom call.

A preliminary analysis of the suggestions shows they can be grouped into nine thematic areas, with some overlap between themes. These are: spiritual design practice, pluriversality, decoloniality and liberation, critical history, critical making, social design, metacognition, principles of practice and social sciences.

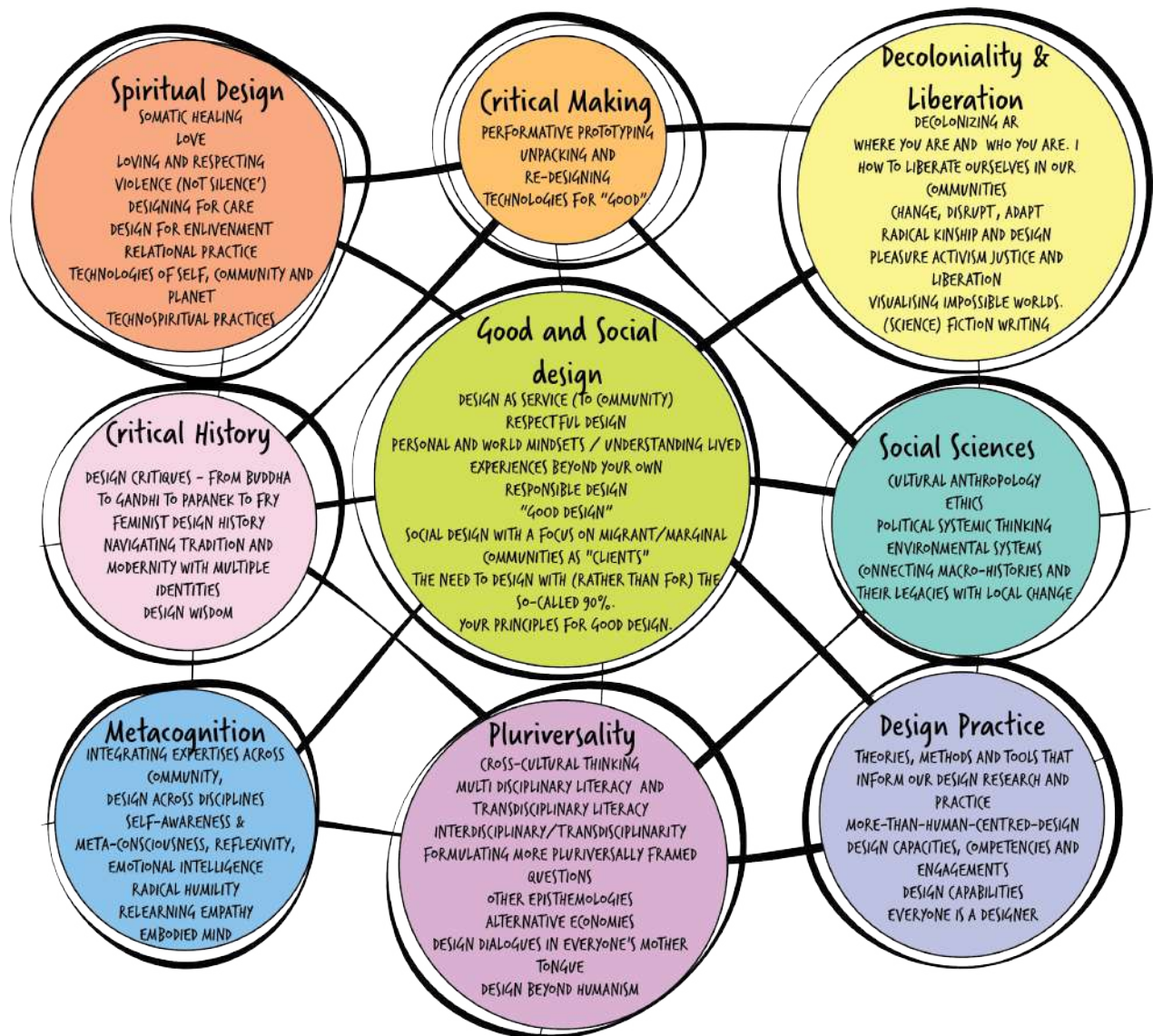


Figure 6. A selection of courses suggested by participants at PIVOT 2020: Designing a world of many worlds.

7. Conclusion

While none of these images actually represent a curriculum that is easily implementable, they can provide guiding principles for the philosophy of a design program. These sketches demonstrate what design curricula could look like from many different starting points and different worldviews. These curricula separate design education from innovation or consumption, and instead focus on identity, agency, culture, and building thinking skills. These experiments have helped me to challenge existing paradigms, giving me the confidence to be more experimental in creating design education and design processes guided by different worldviews and different constraints that are relevant to specific contexts. The drawings helped me organize and classify the information, and also made the ideas easily communicable to many audiences.

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About the Author:

Lesley-Ann Noel PhD. I am an Afro-Trinidadian design educator, based in New Orleans. In my work, I focus on equity, social justice and the experiences of people who are often excluded from design research. My doctoral research focused on emancipatory design thinking at a rural primary school in Trinidad and Tobago. I also attempt to promote a greater critical awareness among designers and design students. Deep empathy is a key theme in my classes, where students build relationships across difference before collaborating on design with community partners. My research also highlights the work of designers outside of Europe and North America. My identity is shaped by my ethnic background as an Afro-Trinidadian; my experience as a daughter, sister and mother; and my lived experiences in Trinidad and Tobago, Brazil, Tanzania, Uganda and the USA.

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