Participating in the Pluriverse from within the Academy: Design Thinking Assessment & Research

Transcript of Pivot 2020 presentation

LAKE Danielle
Director of Design Thinking and Associate Professor, Elon University
dlake@elon.edu

How might those situated within university structures design teaching, research, and service opportunities that shift higher education towards supporting a “pluriverse”? This paper is meant to serve as an invitation to Reimagine ‘Impact’ within Higher Education. I situate this call within my own lived experiences trying to enact these practices and by explicating several promising strategies emerging from overlapping fields—including ecosystems design, participatory action research, and feminist pragmatism. While design thinking and systems thinking are interwoven with and can reinforce hegemonic and colonial practices, they also provide opportunities for radical and relational imaginaries that build bridges toward multiple ways of thriving. Given their histories and the current state of higher education, I aim to visualize some of the present barriers and opportunities for diverse and expansive assessment and research. I also seek to hold space for exploring how we might incorporate frameworks that take relational and ethical connections to one another seriously and crack open opportunities to reshape the structures and cultures of higher education in order to generate more inclusive and just impact.

keywords; design thinking; participatory action research; systems thinking
I first want to say thank you for the opportunity to be here. I am first and foremost eager to learn from all of you and humbled to share a little bit of what I have been doing. This proposal is an invitation to think together. It is informed by my own lived experience as a white, straight, cisgender, able-bodied, university professor; it is also situated at a private, liberal arts, undergraduate institution in the Southern United States. I recognize that the ideas suggested here are inherently limited by blind spots. I thus begin by situating the work I have been doing. After highlighting some of the barriers I and others have encountered, I summarize our case study. I am interested in exploring how we might reimagine what it means to participate in something like a pluriverse from within institutions of higher education.

![Elon By Design](image)

**Be with & learn from...**

*Figure 1 Elon Methods of Learning. Source: author*

The efforts summarized below are infused by my experience as a philosopher and a director of design thinking, as somebody who’s still trying to figure out how to use the power and privileges I bring to these situations in relationship with diverse communities and how that can help to shift some of the unjust and exclusive systems, practices, and cultures that are present, especially within the Academy. I am trying to stay aware, as well, of the hypocrisy of trying to do this work from within the system. I am troubled by the consistent inadequacies I bring to these tasks and eager to learn from all of you.
A Third University is Possible

“Schooling is not one thing. It is an “assemblage of machines” and, because of this, its “machinery” can be subverted in many ways”

La Paperson xiv

Appropriate & Reinvent

Higher Education’s Impact? Peter Lang Series

Figure 2 Quote from La Paperson xiv. Source: author

I want to situate some of the assessment and research I am going to talk about within La Paperson’s third university. I want us to explore how we can use some of the tools that are around us in order to do different kinds of work.

With that in mind, there are a couple of very recent research and assessment metrics that have come out in 2019-20. Ashoka U’s evaluating change maker education provides recommendations on how to assess design thinking and change-making pedagogies across the curriculum. Darden’s white paper by Liedtka and Bahr describes design thinking practices that are happening across nonprofit government and business sectors and what kinds of outcomes they are perceiving.
As I began this new role in the fall of 2019, a coalition of individuals from across the University was formed in order to support more inclusive and collaborative innovation. The coalition included individuals from different positions (including administrators, faculty, community partners, community members, and a student) trying to understand what is happening around change-making across the campus and in the local community. We wanted to explore what we could learn from one another, how we might visualize what is happening, and where there are opportunities to better support each other. This network and the relationships it built supported the emergence of subsequent research we are engaged in.

Historic Mapping at Elon
Design Thinking Studio in Social Innovation

- Deep Dive Immersion
- Long Term Value & Outcomes
- Qualitative
- Semi-structured Interviews
- Inclusive Outreach
  - Alumni
  - Faculty
  - Community

Longitudinal

Figure 4 The Coalition for Change. Source: author

Figure 5 Elon’s design thinking studio in action. Source: author
One is a longitudinal study looking at the history of the Design Thinking Studio in Social Innovation across the past three-four years: What can we learn? This study also examines insights across stakeholders; we are interviewing alumni, faculty, community partners, and administrators. We are exploring what we have to learn about the stories, the mindsets, the challenges, and the recommendations they would have about how to do change-making work moving forward.

**Geographic Mapping at Elon**

**The Ecosystem**

- Survey (Bahr & Liedtka)
- Interview

Research Questions
- RQ 1: Practices
- RQ 2: Outcomes
- RQ 3: Relationship

The other study looks at what is happening across the University campus. We have 35 different courses and programs that we are assessing. What kinds of practices are happening across the curriculum? What kinds of outcomes do faculty perceive? What kinds of challenges are they facing? Our goal is to compare what we are doing to what is happening in other sectors and design interventions designed to respond to and enhance current practices.

**Systemic**

*Figure 6 Geographic Mapping at Elon. Source: author*

*Figure 7 Elon's programs in design thinking. Source: author*
These visual highlights the different programs we have involved in a study-graduate and undergraduate, liberal arts, sciences and so on.

The findings really show we are especially implementing DT practices like radical listening and interviewing across diverse perspectives, but we are not doing as much of the prototyping, testing, and iterating.
We have also found that we have several programs doing deeper dives into design thinking projects. There are critical opportunities to enhance these programs.

In addition, there's some interesting comparison findings into what we are finding in our own university, and what is happening out there in the business nonprofit and government sectors.
At the moment, then, we have these two studies looking at the historical setting of what’s going on as well as trying to map the systems and I’m trying to also look across stakeholder groups: Future goals are focused on understanding what current students are experiencing.

Figure 12 Studies outline looking at current student’s experience. Source: author

Feminist Pragmatism

“We reimagine by combining activism with philosophy... We have to see every crisis as both a danger and an opportunity. It’s a danger because it does so much damage to our lives, to our institutions, to all that we have expected. But it’s also an opportunity for us to become creative; to become the new kind of people that are needed at such a huge period of transition.”

(Boggs, Living for Change, December 10, 2017) [http://boggscenter.org/category/grace-lee-boggs/]

Figure 13 The Bog’s Center on Feminist Pragmatism. Source: author

This work is infused by my background as a feminist, pragmatist philosopher. I am committed to doing work that is situated in our identities, that is place-based and relational, but also action-oriented and connected to my study of Grace Lee Boggs. It is critical that we situate our approach. She argues revolution is relational, that it is two-sided, emergent, and co-transformative.
Emergent Strategy

Small is good, small is all.
Change is constant.
Move at the speed of trust.
What you pay attention to grows.

There is a conversation in the room that only these people at this moment can have.
Find it.

*Adrienne Maree Brown*

Figure 14 Emergent Strategy according to Adrienne Brown. Source: author

All this also takes me back to efforts on emergent strategy suggesting radical change is often more incremental than we realize. Adrienne Maree Brown argues small actions move us forward, that change is constant, and that there’s ways to press for that change in the spaces we are in. With this framing in mind, it is worthwhile to continue to enter and learn across spaces of difference.

Making the *Invisible* Visible → Aesthetic Disruption

I also link these efforts to the work of Josina Vink. Vink is focused on how we make people aware of what is often invisible to them. How might we generate awareness of our own and others’ power and privilege? How might we encourage awareness of the structures and cultures around us that press us to
make certain actions instead of others? She talks about the role of “aesthetic disruption” and how design can really start to spark disruptions that lead to macro level changes.

**Participatory Action Research**

![Diagram of Participatory Action Research](image)


*Figure 16 Visual of Participatory Action Research. Source: author*

This work is also inspired by participatory action research (PAR) practices. My past work has examined both the value of PAR and the challenges. I appreciate how PAR encourages us to invite others and then to get out and learn together. It aims to hold us accountable to everyone involved in these problems and it presses us to consider how our research might turn into collaborative action. But I have also found that there are a lot of risks and challenges to that work and that kind of practice can be co-opted as a cover of legitimacy.

This also links back to the wealth of barriers presented by the academy. There is a lot of research showing how hard it is to do this kind of work. I have also encountered a lot of risks and barriers and that is despite the privileges that I bring to the work. Again, research on faculty experience confirms over and over, and a lot of publications, on the epistemological, historical, structural, and cultural barriers to moving education into being more embedded in its communities- there are a lot of blind spots here.

**Strategies**

Sustain engagement across borders

Critical hope in the face of the tragic

Radical Imaginaries

Relational Meliorism

*Figure 17 Strategies of engagement across disciplines. Source: author*
In studying and advocating for change over the past ten years, a few key strategies have emerged. First, there is a need to sustain our engagement across borders and spaces of difference. Second, we need to find and hold onto critical hope even in the face of deep struggle; and, three, we need to seek out radical imaginaries as a way to spark new ways of being in the world together. We need to find ways to move forward in relationship with others.

For me, in this space, I have opportunities to create think tanks, to fund projects that are more collaborative, and to co-design cross-institutional, longitudinal research. I am interested in continuing the critical action-oriented study of what is happening within higher education, to press for and again advocate for that change and hold space for more creative approaches.

Figure 18 Think tank and global project opportunities. Source: author

Figure 19 What might we do to move? Source: author
As a part of that work I am a co-editor of a new book series with Peter Lang publishers entitled Higher Education and Civic Democratic Engagement: Exploring Impact. This series is intended to hold space for critical and creative collaborative research on higher education and engagement emerging now.

For inquiries on submitting a proposal contact the Series Editors. Barry Kanpol (Kanpolb@gvsu.edu) & Danielle Lake (lakeda@gvsu.edu) I am interested in what we can do to move forward. I am interested in what we might do together. I am committed to learning with all of you and I am grateful for this opportunity. Thank you.

References


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About the Authors:

Danielle Lake’s teaching, research, and service are informed by her lived experiences as a white, settler, straight, cisgender, able-bodied, first-generation feminist pragmatist philosopher situated within and between the academy and surrounding communities. She is the Director of Design Thinking and Associate Professor at Elon University. Her teaching and scholarship bridge design thinking and wicked problems research with the public engagement movement. Current projects seek to explore the long-term impact of relational, place-based learning, design thinking practices, and pedagogies of resilience. By designing, enacting, and assessing an array of relational, critical, and creative engaged teaching, research, and service practices she hopes to expand possibilities for more imaginative and actionable efforts around changemaking. She is co-editor of the book series Higher Education and Civic Democratic Engagement: Exploring Impact with Peter Lang Publishing. More about her work can be found at works.bepress.com/Danielle lake.