

Communities of Practice: Doing Design Differently

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This paper reflects on the role of communities of practice in building and supporting critical alternatives to conventional, Dominant Design (Akama, 2021; Rosner, 2018). Dominant Design refers to design practices cultivated within our industrialised, imperialist, patriarchal, capitalist modernity. Discourses and practices addressing this include decolonising design, stemming from modernity/coloniality critique and Indigenous knowledge systems, and anti-oppressive frameworks for design, based in anti-racism and Black feminist scholarship. These discourses at the margins of the dominant discourse and practice recognise the need for critical alternatives to design practices (Abdulla et al., 2019; Costanza-Chock 2018; Mignolo 2007; Schultz et al., 2018). This paper considers communities of practice as one way of practicing with the challenges of overwhelm, fear and lack of understanding and resources when pursuing decolonising and anti-oppression discourse and practice. The paper discusses the importance of practice as an ethic, and the role of spaces for rehearsing, experimenting with new types of doing, while being held accountable in community.

Communities of practice, decolonising, rehearsal, Dominant Design

1. Introduction

Over the last three years I have workshopped, interviewed, casually-conversed, reading-grouped, forum-chatted and written extensively about ways to bring anti-oppression and decolonising discourses into practices on the ground within design practice and research. This research has been focused on how to make some of the more confronting, such as white privilege, and abstract, such as ontological shifting, elements of this discourse accessible in a way people can both understand and personally reflect on their relationship to the content. This research is deeply related to my own process as a white, Western, colonial settler, cisgendered woman, relatively high on the matrix of domination. I work in collaborative social practices, and in this practice bring the conditioning I have received through what bell hooks calls the, "imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (hooks, 2010, p. 3). Through this conditioning I bring this system in implicit and explicitly ways through who and how I am as a

person, my practices, my knowledge and frameworks For people who, like me, share characteristics that place us high on the matrix of domination, this system runs more seamlessly as a part of who we are-- how we are socialised, cultural and family backgrounds, education, philosophical and religious orientation. White, settler, cisgendered folks positions, beliefs, values, actions are consistently validated. Without critical awareness we can go through the world without feeling interrogated, unsettled or erased by the system. This work is to help bring the critical awareness that allows us to instead interrogate, unsettle and start to erase the system.

Through the work of postcolonial scholars and decoloniality we are asked to 'delink' our ways of knowing from the modern/colonial structures, "we must consider how to decolonize the 'mind' (Thiongo) and the 'imaginary' (Gruzinski) that is, knowledge and being" (Mignolo, 2007, p. 450). The structures of modernity/coloniality often form the basis of not only our education, communication and political structures, but also serve to define the normative and dominant ideas around identity, aesthetics and social relations. The work calls for radical and comprehensive structural change to the very fabric of our existence, demanding abstract critical actions such as delinking epistemologies and shifting ontologies (Abdulla et al., 2019; Mignolo 2007; Schultz, et al., 2018). This response emphasises deep, structural change beyond what we do, but to our very foundations of how we come to knowing and our very being in the world. This is emphasised to contrast with additive changes such as changing practice and methods in order to make design 'better', (Schultz, et al 2018), using more inclusive language, or building peoples' critical consciousness (Tuck and Yang, 2012). Not as a mode of criticising these actions or doings, but as a call for work that has a more radical, ontological orientation. This discourse from the margins calls for work that is engaged externally—socially, historically and politically engaged—while also working on the small inter and intra personal scales as individuals and communities to be better able to embrace and be with plural and heterogenous worldviews (Akama 2017; Escobar 2018). Design researchers have offered guidance in how one might begin or engage the work of delinking and shifting through examples of producing complex, reflexive positionalities (Akama, et al. 2019; Albarran Gonzalez 2020); acting with deeper understanding of political and civilisational histories entangled in project briefs (Agid 2018; Keshavarz 2020); and highlighting valuable alternative designs that are discounted by conventional industrial standards (Calderón Salazar and Gutiérrez Borrero 2017; Sanin 2021).

Within engaged, everyday practices of professional designers, saturated by dominant discourse, there is an **enormity** to engaging decolonial and anti-oppression critiques. It asks nothing less than what can feel like an impossible task of dismantling the all-pervasive and powerful "imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (hooks, 2010). There is an **intimidating complexity** to engaging in structural change that feels beyond individual spheres of influence. It asks for deeper practices of self awareness and vulnerability with practices of personal disclosure (Akama et al., 2019). There is **fear and cultural resistance** to being "exposed" or "getting it wrong" in professional and social contexts. Personal disclosure is **uncomfortable** and perceived as "self-centred", "tokenistic" or "virtue signaling" in research and industry practices (McEntee, 2020). There is a **challenge of proximity and time for the relationship building** that is necessary to create material, political or social change work collaboratively with communities in everyday design work.

2. Practice

As we recognise the personal and structural enormity in encountering decolonising and anti-oppression critique to design practice, it is also not a discursive critique, but an active process. Pedro Olivera describes, "the need to position decolonizing design as a *doing*...this process unfolds slowly and as a

constant struggle, without necessarily reaching a “pivotal point” of a “decolonial” or “decolonized” design” (Schultz et al., 2018, p. 93, emphasis in original). In a panel discussion at ServDes2020 design researcher Shana Agid discussed the work of practice. Drawing on an idea of practice from his work with leaders in the Transformative Justice movement, Mariame Kaba and Shira Hassan, she emphasizes practice as something that is done,

[W]ith the acknowledgement that you are going to mess up...get it wrong many, many times, and it is through that work that one becomes expert...but not expertise as....a moment of differentiation but having practiced enough to feel that you can do things with the people around you (Penin et al., 2021).

Agid’s presentation of practice and expertise offers a helpful re-frame in thinking about approaching the work to engage decolonising and anti-oppression work into our practices. By presenting expertise as something that is not an end goal, nor is it something that is ‘right’ or comprehensive, but is process oriented. It is not something contained in a moment, a knowledge of what to do and not do, but rather experience that builds over time, a commitment to show up for doing the work, for the learning and practicing, and engaging in the doing.

3. Communities of Practice

Communities of practice are one way of organising a community of people. It is characterised by a group of people who share a common profession, and come together for purposes of connecting, networking, learning and building capacities around particular topics and skills related to their profession. It is formally differentiated from other community groups as requiring a shared field of practice, a regular, though not necessarily formal, engagement and that the individuals are engaged in an actual shared field of practice (Li et al., 2009).

Communities of practice are a type of environment that can be used to promote and allow for developing an expertise of “having practiced enough to feel that you can do things with the people around you”. By this I mean considering a community of practice as a container that can hold particular *types of doing* which lead to a different kind of expertise. An expertise that is not about differentiating what one knows or doesn’t, but rather is demonstrable through doing that comes from long term commitments and practice. This is an expertise in process, rather than content¹. A focus of this work on process helps to redirect from surface level, additive changes, and begins to demonstrate deeper structural changes, even ontological, that an expertise in content often does not attempt. Considerations presented here to foster this container within a community of practice include: creating communities with shared political and social commitments; operating communities as open rehearsal spaces set up for feedback and repetition; curation of group members to ensure community accountability; and recognising the space as one in which the types of doing are not beholden to the timelines, budgets, client-demands and output-orientation of workplace cultures.

In my research I have drawn on my own experience of being a participant and organiser of communities of practice. Through I have attended to some of the ways these communities have created opportunities for my own development of practicing different processes. This includes *finding language to directly acknowledge my whiteness and privileged perspectives; trying (and failing and processing and learning)*

¹ This language and orientation to direct attention to process rather than content comes from the teachings and practices shared with me over many years as a committed student of Zen Awareness Practice through the Zen Monastery Peace Center, <https://www.livingcompassion.org>.

to create space 'safe' to share lived experience in a setting across varying levels of matrix of domination; becoming more comfortable and versed in work and practices that are not profit- or goal-oriented; being made aware by peers how power dynamics are being created and shifting; confronting my own unconscious erasing and discounting trans-identities through language and group dynamics. These situations point to changes in process, not tangible outcomes in which a concrete takeaway can be accounted for, a card deck created for others to learn from, but from continual engagement, with a common group of people, holding and creating space to practice.

3.1. Shared Commitment

The shared commitment that the community is joining around is a commitment to ethical, just, anti-racist, anti-oppression, decolonising practice in design. Examples from my practice include the CoDesign Club, a community of practice committed to the Design Justice Principles, the Design & Ethics group of Service Design Melbourne, a professional network organised to ethically challenge design practice and values in community, and reflective listening partnership², which is a one-on-one weekly check-in to reflect on our own respective work, emphasising process over content. The way a shared commitment is defined by a group could vary based on the identities of participants, professional roles, overall goals of the group (social, networking, professional support, consciousness raising, writing, etc.) as well as geographical location and pre-existing relationships. It is important to note that within an invited community of practice, diversity shows up. The research here is specifically for audiences who have privileges derived through race, gender identity, class, education. This work is trying to make legible how these privileges show up in our work in diverse spaces, and offer practices of attending to this. However, people within a community of practice can be there for different, or multiple, reasons. It is not exclusively a space for the kind of practices described for this specific audience.

3.2. Rehearsal space

Rehearsal spaces are known as committed time and space for practicing something particular before public-facing 'performances'. They are collectively run and organised with the purpose of practicing *and* providing productive feedback. A rehearsal space serves as both the space in which the work is created and a practice space which allows you to confront, review and change how you are approaching the work. What is meant here is not to rehearse to the point one is 'prepared' with the 'right' answers, but to have the opportunity to create the conditions for practice, feedback and reflection in order to develop better performance. Creating a rehearsal space encourages taking risks and trying things out you may not have done before.

Rehearsals are spaces informed by an ethic of practice. This helps *create the conditions* to allow for vulnerability of personal disclosure rather than polish of personal presentation. That this work will not be easy or done well the first time. It allows for a long-term commitment to learning and changing, rather than needing to *know* and quick fixes to practice. A community of practice might present the opportunity one needs to practice acknowledgement of country, ask for help on creating inclusive language for an event, share a sensitive story, get advice on calling in a colleague, or be a space for you to be asked to recognise some of your own ignorances and privileges from which you are operating. In specific action, these are perhaps small instances. But taken collectively, looked at from a process level, what they being to empower or shift is deeper than the act itself.

This requires that the community of practice be calibrated to a similar level of expertise and depth. It should be a space in which all can actively participate, as well as learn from others in the group. If there

² This professional practice is based on a similar program I have participated in for many years run by the Zen Monastery Peace Center, Reflective Listening Buddies.

are significant differences in hierarchy or expertise, it becomes a challenge for everyone in the space to be active participants. It risks becoming a passive environment, with a few leading conversations or presenting content, while others passively listen. Or conversely, a space that does not feel safe or appropriately challenging depending on how people are exploring their own identity, criticality or practice. People in a rehearsal space ideally should be able to contribute to the learning and development of others, as well as be challenged by the content and process brought by others.

3.3. Types of doing

Day-to-day work and life environments are shaped by budgets, timelines, expectations, solution-seeking and evaluation. These systems and structures, whether in industry or academia, are suffused with values of patriarchy, modernity and white supremacy. The processes and relationships that operate within these spaces are often subject, or easily fall into, ways of operating and values decolonising and anti-oppression work are actively pushing against. Communities of practice can be, through conscious effort, spaces that operate outside of these norms. Established outside the need to contribute in financial or productive terms, without the aims to create work, publications or even recognition. Through prioritising time and resources for building relationships, learning, sharing and processing, practitioners can come together to work, create and discuss in wholly different environments. This asks one to fundamentally reimagine a design practice that is not working towards outcomes, goals or client needs. It questions what might be a design practice of the future that operates outside of the current conditions which define doing. It is uncommon to come together with other professionals in our field in these ways. It can feel unnatural or uncomfortable. It takes time to learn how to be with others and learn without a sense of productivity, urgency or valuation.

Structural ignorance is a force which supports the kinds of structural oppression norms common in working environments. By removing some of the constraints prevalent in our places of work, these ignorances can be revealed to us and become a space to hold ignorance to account. This includes exposing ingrained behaviours and beliefs toward superiority, erasure, individualism and oppressive biases.

4. Conclusion

The necessary and crucial response for anti-oppressive and decolonising alternative practices is urgent and impassioned, but the work of getting there is slow and careful. This paper highlights the need to find places to work outside the immediacy and logic of solution-finding or fixing. To create practices which are shaped slowly and over time, through long-term, sustained commitments. In our immediate workplace environments it can feel impossible to engage alternative, anti-oppressive practices. Communities of practice may serve as a place for creating commitments, building skills, relationships and ways of working at a distance from these structures. The examples in this paper seek to discourage methods, tools and answers for 'how to' decolonise or create anti-oppressive practices, and encourages regular embedded practices, supported by community, attunement and reflection.

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About the Author

Kate McEntee is a PhD candidate in WonderLab, a co-design research lab at Monash University on the traditional lands of the Bunurong people in Melbourne, Australia. My research explores how to create shifts in our relationship to larger systems of oppression, within social collaborative practice. I work with communities in industry, non-profit and academic settings. Originally I am from northern Utah, the native land of the Eastern Shoshone and Goshute peoples. Raised in a Catholic home, in homogeneously white, small-town America, my worldview is deeply shaped by being white, Christian values, a bootstrap work ethic and individualism, and American exceptionalism. Through studying Religious Studies (BA) and working in interfaith dialog, then studying Transdisciplinary Design (MFA) and working on research around race and white privilege, and nearly 20 years as a Zen Awareness practitioner, I have been increasingly exposed to the limitations and biases embedded in and through my identity and worldview. Previous to this PhD, I also worked in corporate creative consulting in San Francisco and New York, and in academic research and teaching in Australia.