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The desire to excel in design education: Have we pushed it too far?

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Abstract: In our work as design educators, we have been experimenting with and researching a range of initiatives that aim to improve design student wellbeing, learning outcomes and designer resilience at TU Delft and at the University of Technology Sydney. One aspect that has come up repeatedly in our work is this pressure to perform and its tension with learning and wellbeing. We used this DRS22 conversation to explore this topic more deeply.

Keywords: design education; student wellbeing; student success

1. Background

We increasingly notice that students have a strong desire to excel, to perform better than their peers, and to score high grades. While working hard is an attitude that we tend to value as educators, this overachieving attitude also has negative consequences for learning outcomes and for student wellbeing.

Trends of ill mental health in students in higher education have been well reported (Fernandez et al., 2016). We see similar trends with our design students who are experiencing anxiety and feelings of depression while working on their design project, particularly when they are working individually (M. van der Bijl - Brouwer & Price, 2021). We furthermore notice that the desire to perform can have negative consequences for learning outcomes as learning requires experimentation, stepping outside your comfort zone and making mistakes. This is particularly true for students in creative disciplines such as design, which require ongoing experimentation and iteration.

The desire to excel is not so surprising if we look at it in light of the dominant mechanistic worldview led by ideals of meritocracy. These ideals consider competition and individualisation as the main mechanisms to become more successful in (professional) life (Laloux, 2014). This is also reflected in academia in which trends of metrics-driven and high-pressure university environments lead to undesirable effects on wellbeing (Barcan, 2016; Shore & Wright,



2000). In the design field this pressure to perform is further exacerbated by an ever-increasing focus on 'design heroism' in which individual designers are put on a pedestal. In design education this has often translated into increasing embedding of competitive elements in design courses, awards, sharing of wins etc.

As a response to ego-centred design and its negative impact on wellbeing, some new approaches and perspectives have emerged that move away from valuing 'design excellence', for example the focus on designers as human beings (Senova, 2017) and movements towards more humble approaches to design. Likewise, in higher education we can see some new initiatives that move away from the dominant narrative on excellence and student performance, to ambition and student success (Van Veluwen, 2020).

In our work as design educators we have been experimenting with and researching a range of initiatives that aim to improve design student wellbeing, learning outcomes and designer resilience at TU Delft (Price, 2021; M. van der Bijl - Brouwer & Price, 2021) and at the University of Technology Sydney (Mieke van der Bijl - Brouwer et al., 2019). One aspect that has come up repeatedly in our work is this pressure to perform and its tension with learning and wellbeing. We used this DRS22 conversation to explore this topic more deeply.

2. Conducting the conversation

Our approach to conducting the conversation maximised the time each participant could converse with each other in smaller teams. Each team could then summarise their discussion to the plenary group in a 'go around' fashion. This approach maximised participation and established an egalitarian environment where each voice was valued. We recommended this approach and received good feedback from participants regarding the format. An overview of our approach is located in Table 1.

Our first activity in the conversation began with a short introduction from ourselves, followed by each participant. We asked, 'who are you and why are you here today?' Asking these questions set an informal tone and enabled participants to describe their motivations.

A few sample responses were:

- "I want to be a better teacher"
- "I am concerned that my students are not learning, only trying to get high grades"
- "I want to learn about what other institutions are doing to balance student success with performance goals"
- "I've never taught before and will have to soon, so I am learning as much about education as I can."

Participants of the conversation had roles such as:

- PhD candidate
- Education Director

- Dean
- Associate Dean of Education
- Assistant and Associate Professor

Table 1. Overview of Conversation

Item	Time	Activity
0	5min	Walk-in/buffer
1	10 min	Topic introduction: we set the scene of the conversation
2	15min	Conversations in groups to share and collect experiences & stories on “What is your experience with the desire to excel in your design education?”.
3	15min	Presentation of our research and educational interventions on the topic of design excellence, learning and student wellbeing at TU Delft and University of Technology Sydney
4	30min	Dialogue on ‘How might we shape future design education considering the desire to excel and opportunity of learning affecting student wellbeing?’
5	15min	Plenary reflection and capturing key insights: What is key to understand this topic? How do we proceed considering this topic in our design education?

Our participants represented institutions from broad range of nations. This is a small sample based on our memory and not complete in any means:

- USA
- UK
- Netherlands
- Italy
- Singapore
- Spain
- Sweden
- Denmark
- Finland

Given the hybrid format, we had one facilitator in the physical conversation to transfer online activity to participants in the room. The second facilitator was the leader of activities in the physical room at Bilbao. While the third facilitator was online and stimulated engagement in the ‘chat’. We took care to ensure those in the room and online could learn about each other’s conversations and build upon content. The approach worked well and is recommended. Our conversation pivoted around asking each group to reflect, muse and make propositions based on the following two questions:

1. “What is your experience with the desire to excel in your design education?”
2. “What do we really want for our students?”

3. Outcomes

It is difficult to capture the richness and temporality of the conversations in this session. Instead, we list outcomes of the discussion and then extract some challenges to consider beyond this conference.

3.1 *“What is your experience with the desire to excel in your design education?”*

Participants indicated:

- Many students look to their peers for progress and thus learn to naturally benchmark their work rather than celebrate what makes the way they design unique to them
- Students are in fast-paced courses where little reflection is afforded to question deeper level learning. Courses must be designed to host reflection periods between assignments or at the end of assignments.
- Students who overwork and go beyond expectations that are then rewarded with high grades reinforce a culture of poor-work-life balance. Is there a way to moderate this?
- What does excellence actually mean in various environments? Could excellence be deliberately reframed in our classrooms to encompass aspects well beyond grading to care and generosity? What impact would this have on students?
- A competitive environment is stimulated, which is not always a bad thing. Competition underpins working in an economy where quality is important. Becoming reflexive to performance culture is an opportunity for further development.
- One participant spoke how his school apply the word emancipation rather than excellence. Students are encouraged to go ‘their own way’, and develop their own ways of designing that help them to make sense of their past, present and future.
- Another participant spoke about the importance of self-evaluation as a means to centre the student around their own learning gain, rather than being tested against the ‘bell curve’.

3.2 *“What do we really want for our students?”*

Participants indicated:

- We want to create environments that stimulate individual creativity and authenticity, rather than homogenous outcomes;
- We want pass/fail moments where Grade Point Average weighting is lost and learning through productive failure is encouraged;
- We want our students to see that practitioners fail too, even the most senior and experienced (Zaha Hadid firm keynote example);

- We want to foreground values such as care and inclusivity. These values should be ‘interwoven’ into all teaching/learning activities;
- We want time and space to deeply reflect with students, not applying always action-based learning objectives that shape curriculum;
- We want time, space and recognition for teachers to develop initiatives that promote community and personal growth of students
- We want the opportunity to make institutional reforms necessary to facilitate these changes described above.

4. Conclusion

We feel we are hearing stories from educators working in systems under pressure. Pressure seems to be arising from growing pains related to increasing class size and subsequent decrease in teacher to individual student interaction. Other pressures relate to rankings, grades and scoring systems that determine merit. These pressures contribute to teaching and learning environments that often lack deeper level learning and favour performance-based outcomes. Finally, room for individual reflection is often underappreciated in curriculum. This is ironic, given so much of how designers learn in their practice is based on reflection in, and on action. It is clear, there is much work to be done to improve design education. The passion and expertise of the people in our conversation gives us confidence this process is well underway.

The conversation was friendly, collegial and insightful. Thanks to the participants whom contributed generously.

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Marie Van den Bergh is a design researcher and design coach with interest in researching and working on societal challenges with and for society. Her recent work concerns designing Community-Based Learning experiences in higher education, specifically at TU Delft.

Dr. Mieke van der Bijl-Brouwer is Associate Professor in Design for Social Innovation with an interest in how we can shift the academic system to improve student flourishing. She has researched and designed various student wellbeing initiatives at University of Technology Sydney and TU Delft.

Dr. Rebecca Price is Assistant Professor of Transition Design at TU Delft. She is a receiver of a Senior Comenius Fellowship grant titled 'Forging Resilient Designers'. Design resilience is the way a designer bounces back from setbacks and criticism and negotiates uncertainty.