Expanding Who Is Imagined Within the Classroom

An intervention proposal on belonging, access and who a course is imagined for

Sabrina Miller – Unit 2: Inclusive practices - Intervention Proposal

I'm interested in what belonging feels like – not as an abstract idea, but as something that is designed into spaces, relationships and daily encounters.

Hicham Benohoud's photographic series The Classroom (1994–2002) staged his own students within the desks, walls and materials of a real Moroccan schoolroom – using the architecture itself as a collaborator, and quietly asking what a room trains a body to do.

Who gets to feel welcome?

What makes participation possible?

What prevents belonging before someone even enters a room?

MA Design for Social Innovation and Sustainable Futures is a predominantly international cohort with strong East Asian representation, and a much smaller number of UK-domiciled and other global majority students (if any, some years).

While this brings its own richness, I am increasingly aware that diversity in the room does not automatically translate into diversity of encounter, or into a full range of lived experiences being present within the dialogue, pedagogy and design thinking that happen in the classroom.

01 **Who's in the room**

Cohort composition – by race, class, ethnicity, religion, educational background, “ability”

02 **Who can afford to be**

Tuition, living costs, financial risk, employability

03 **Who sees themselves reflected**

Curriculum, staff, peer representation, visual media & communication

THE PROVOCATION

“Who feels able to imagine themselves here?”

How does a course, a website, a classroom, inherently shape who can imagine themselves arriving and belonging in the space at all?

This intervention attempts to slow down that moment of arrival – to look more closely at the barriers that come before the threshold of entry itself. This is an enquiry into how a course is propositioned before a student applies to study, the language and visual indicators that might impact who feels comfortable to apply and how lack of diversity can perpetuate lack of diversity within the cohort due to lack of representation and meaningful input from varied groups of students. I’m also interested in the students experience through the duration of course, whether there feels like there is a disparity between how the course is marketing vs how the student experiences the course. Another observation that I influences accessibility and belonging could be how the physical studio space assigned to course doesn’t consider all physical needs, perpetuates the student-teacher hierarchy within the room layout and design and doesn’t offer modularity or adjustments.

THE CONDITIONS THAT SHAPE WHO APPLIES

01

Cost of study

The consistent rise in tuition, living and maintenance costs increasingly dictate who can even consider postgraduate study.

02

Education as a bet

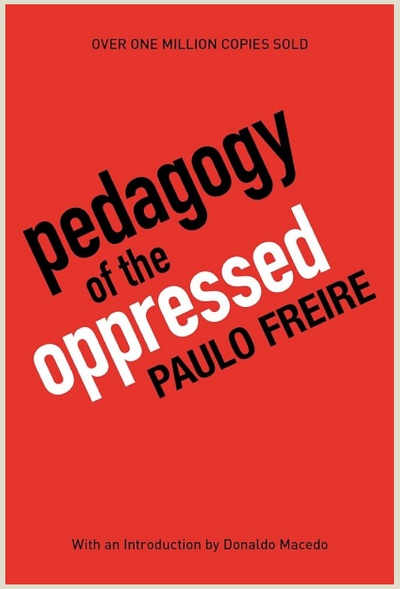
Because of the high tuition fees, HE, consciously or unconsciously, is framed as a consumer investment now meaning that open-ended, less vocational courses might seem more risky, especially with a shaky graduate job market.

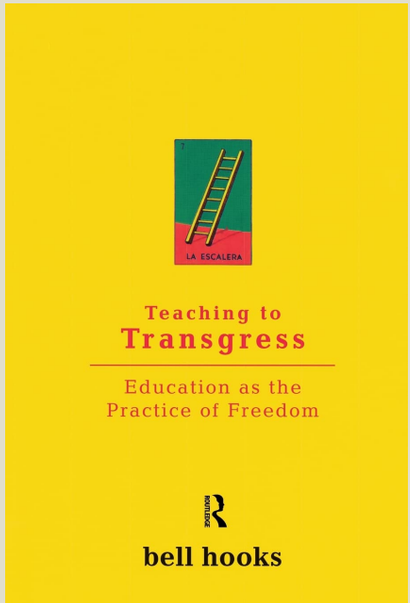
03

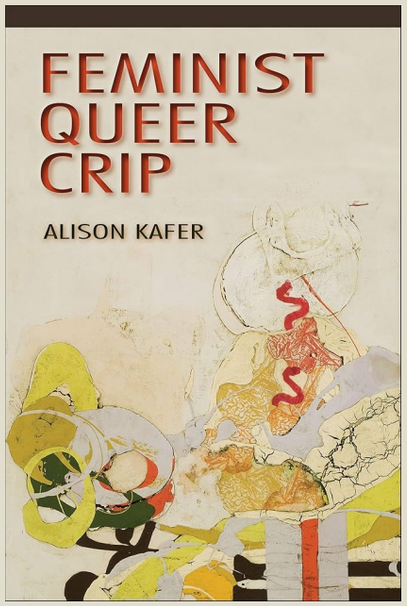
Uneven precedent

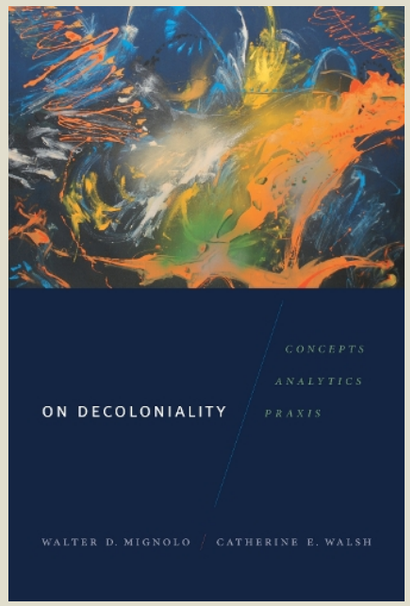
Some communities simply don't have visible precedent for entering a field like design for social innovation – so it's harder to picture themselves there.

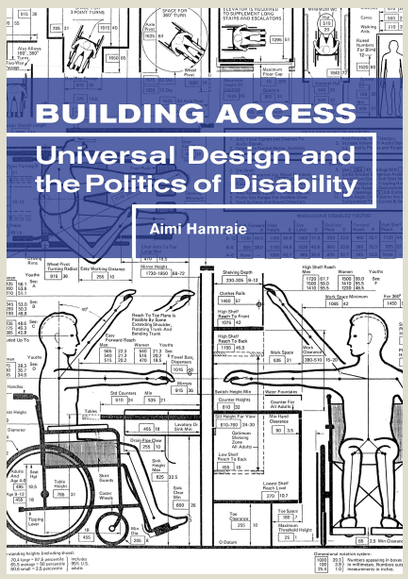
THEORY, REFERENCES & RESEARCH

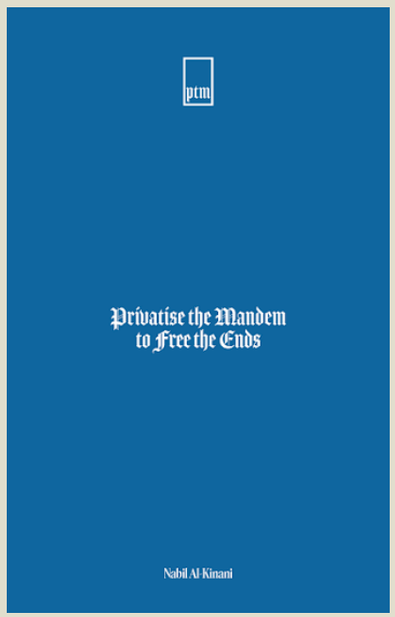


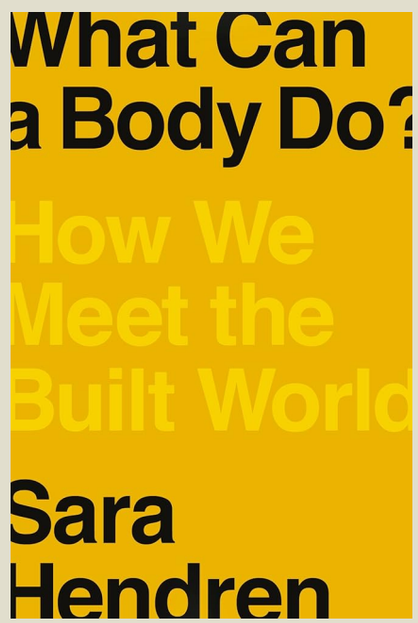












01

Pedagogy of the Oppressed

Paulo Freire, 1970 — Theory

02

Teaching to Transgress

bell hooks, 1994 — Theory

03

Feminist, Queer, Crip

Alison Kafer, 2013 — Theory

04

On Decoloniality

Mignolo & Walsh, 2018 — Theory

05

Building Access

Aimi Hamraie — Architecture & Disability

06

UDL Guidelines

CAST — Learning Design Framework

07

The Classroom

Hicham Benohoud — Photography, 1994–2002

08

What Can a Body Do?

Sara Hendren — Design & Disability

09

Doing Disability Differently

Jos Boys — Architecture & Pedagogy

10

Access Intimacy (essay)

Mia Mingus / Sins Invalid — Disability Justice

THE INTERVENTION

A participatory inquiry into belonging

Creative, dialogic methods exploring how belonging (and its absence) actually gets shaped, across race, ethnicity, religion, disability and learning difference alike.

Mapping Belonging

Students & alumni visually map their journey into the course: first encounter, what felt accessible – physically and otherwise – where they saw themselves reflected, and where they didn't.

Imagining Otherwise Workshops

Collective sessions on: Who's missing from this room? What bodies, faiths, minds does the course seem to assume? What would need to change?

Institutional Audit

A close read of website language, imagery, student stories and speaker line-ups – including whether disability and learning difference appear at all.

CHALLENGES

01

Student capacity

Participants may be deep in Unit 5 final major projects – do they actually have capacity to participate in this kind of reflection in a meaningful way right now?

02

Limits of the current cohort

A less diverse current cohort across race, ethnicity, religion and disability may itself limit how expansively they can imagine a different one.

03

This doesn't rebuild the room or lower tuition fees

It won't lower fees or fix the architecture overnight – the institution moves on their own slow timeline. But it can build the case, with evidence, for more funding, furniture and architectural decisions, universal design implementation, and new outreach methods in the future.

POTENTIAL OUTCOMES

01 Alternative ways of presenting the course to prospective students

02 More relational, embodied forms of outreach

03 Furniture, layout and room-booking recommendations that actually fit hands-on, making-based and somatic teaching methods

04 More honest, visible representation of disability and learning difference in course communications

05 Insight into how belonging is shaped before arrival

06 Longer-term links to outreach, alumni, estates, and scholarship / bursary conversations

DISCUSSION / FEEDBACK QUESTIONS

01	**Which method feels most likely to generate honest, generative insight?**
02	**How do we ask about access or disability without spotlighting anyone?**
03	**Beginning or end of year – Where do you think this intervention would best land, and why?**
04	**If you could change one thing about our studio or crit spaces, what would it be?**
05	**How could findings still feed into funding, estates, or outreach/ comms conversations?**

Please capture your thoughts in the chat if possible :)

FEEDBACK

from the peer presentations and from tutorials

Alice Karsten

- Suggested looking at participatory approaches to curriculum design (possibly drawing on Pedagogy of the Oppressed).
- Prompt students to imagine and propose their own unit or brief:
- If you could write your own unit, what would it include?
- This could help students articulate what they feel is missing from the course and translate those ideas into the learning environment and curriculum.

Victoria

- The end of the academic year feels like an appropriate time to carry out the intervention and reflection.
- The SWAT assessment could be a useful point in the year to gather student insight.
- Opportunity to use this period for co-design with students and to inform future course development.

Steph Fuller (Tutorial, 10 June, 2026)

- Explore creative and visual research methods as an alternative to traditional surveys and more exclusionary academic processes.
- Consider the timing of the intervention in relation to students' capacity
- Think about how participants will be recruited, what they will gain from taking part, and how the intervention fosters a sense of belonging.
- Acknowledge the limitations of the intervention (e.g. it cannot address structural barriers such as tuition fees) while considering how it could inform longer-term institutional change.
- Draw on relevant literature around belonging, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), and somatic/embodied practices to strengthen the proposal.