

REFLECT, REPRODUCE, OR CHALLENGE? DECOLONISATION AND THE FUTURE OF IRISH PRODUCT DESIGN EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how Irish Product Design education continues to *reflect*, *reproduce*, or *challenge* the colonial and industrial epistemologies that underpin Western design pedagogy. Drawing on a polyphonic positionality methodology, the authors analyse their three Irish university programmes to understand how design knowledge is shaped, taught, and questioned. Across all programmes, familiar Western design models and teaching traditions continue to guide how students learn and how “good design” is defined. These structures remain in place even as educators increasingly acknowledge their limits and the narrow worldview they often promote. At the same time, each programme shows efforts to push back against these inherited frameworks. Lecturers introduce new perspectives, challenge universal assumptions, and create opportunities for students to see design as culturally situated rather than neutral. In some cases, institutional constraints unexpectedly create space for experimentation, alternative voices, and more diverse approaches to emerge. However, these changes tend to rely on individual educators rather than systemic shifts. Ireland’s own complex position as both formerly colonised and firmly embedded within Western knowledge systems creates a unique and sometimes tense environment for this work, revealing opportunities for alternative ways of knowing while highlighting the persistence of structural constraints. This paper aims to open up opportunities for further conversation, that may at times prove challenging and uncomfortable, about how Irish Product Design education can grow toward more inclusive, reflective, and culturally grounded futures.

Keywords: Decolonisation, Eurocentrism, product design education, programme design, inclusive pedagogy

1 INTRODUCTION

Continuing reflections within product design education in Europe have increasingly engaged with questions around representation, particularly regarding gender balance, ethnicity, and socio-economic status. Such efforts are necessary, but they often address diversity at the level of participation and visibility. Less frequently examined are the foundations of the knowledge of the discipline itself; the histories, values and frameworks that we develop our educational practice around. Academics working within decolonial design discourse posit that inclusion cannot be limited to demographic diversity but must interrogate the structures that shape what we define as legitimate design practice [1, 2].

The paradigm for European design education developed within the context of Western industrialisation and is closely linked with narratives of technological progress and universal problem-solving [3]. These frameworks are historically entangled with colonial expansion and the advocacy of European knowledge systems as preeminent. Escobar [4] argues modern design practice often operates a “one-world” reality, presuming a universal interpretation rather than acknowledging plural epistemologies. Mignolo [5] defines this as the colonality of knowledge, in which colonial logic endures within learning environments even after the end of colonial rule. This raises an important question for design education: *to what extent do our curricula continue to position a single worldview as universal*, even within contexts that have themselves experienced colonial subjugation?

Ireland has an almost unique context through which these dynamics can be examined; a European nation shaped by British colonial rule but fully embedded within Western academic and professional systems. Irish higher education institutions have historically served as sites of cultural assertion while engaging with broader Eurocentric knowledge systems. Within this context, design education in Ireland remains structurally embedded within Global North knowledge structures and continues to reproduce dominant Western frameworks while attempting to negotiate alternative pathways.

It is important, then, to approach decolonisation as going beyond Western-oriented frameworks of equity and inclusion and providing the impetus to question our institutions and the pedagogical approaches that we practice within them. By examining academic positionality across three distinct Irish universities, this paper seeks to establish a baseline understanding of how Irish education reflects, reproduces, or challenges colonial narratives in design. This paper opens a conversation but does not look to draw conclusions.

2 METHODOLOGIES (POLYPHONIC POSITIONALITY)

Through engaging a method of polyphonic positionality, this work examines how the institutional contexts from Technological University Dublin (TUD), Maynooth University (MU) and University of Limerick (UL) shape the knowledge structures of design education. The approach begins with the premise that education is not neutral but inseparable from the power dynamics which determine what types of knowledge are valued [6]. Within the wider context of design education, these hierarchies are reproduced not only through formal learning but also through our assessment practices, taught histories, and even our studio culture.

Building on Noel's argument [7, 8] that design educators should critically examine how our social and cultural positions shape hierarchies of knowledge. This paper treats positionality as a methodological tool, not a biographical one. As educators, we participate in defining disciplinary norms through the ways we design our curriculum, briefs, and assessment criteria. Noel and Paiva [9] further demonstrate the subtlety with which exclusion can operate within design work, reinforcing the need for critical reflection on how we shape belonging in the studio.

Sara Ahmed's [10] critique of institutional diversity work informs this approach, especially her argument that inclusion can become performative when structural systems remain intact. For this reason, the approach extends beyond concerns of representation to interrogate the narratives of institutions, the default to Western modernity, thinking around industrial progress and Ireland's position within European Knowledge Systems.

In avoiding privileging a singular institutional voice, we adopt polyphony as a method. Each author developed an individual positionality statement that reflected on their institutional history and programme culture as well as their individual understanding of their own cultural and socio-economic background. These statements were shared and subjected to structured mutual interrogation. This dialogic approach draws on hooks' [6] idea that what we know is shaped by our relationships.

2.1 Positionality/Positionality Statements/Statements on Positionality

Our collective positionality as design educators is shaped by our varied identities, histories, and disciplinary formations. Our experiences across race, gender, class, sexuality, ability, nationality, and career paths inform how we understand, teach, and practice Product Design. Despite our different backgrounds and perspectives, we share an understanding that design knowledge is never neutral. We remain committed to ongoing self-examination and accountability, recognising that our subjectivities shape our teaching, assessment, and interpretations of design practice, and that our contributions are always situated rather than universal.

Oratile: I position myself as a Black Southern African female design educator whose formation was shaped by a Euro Western design curricula that obscured their own colonial foundations. My experiences teaching in Botswana, South Africa, and now Ireland continually foreground how race, gender, and inherited structures shape my authority and responsibility. I am committed to ongoing unlearning, reflexivity, and accountability in the knowledge I teach and reproduce.

Alastair: I am a white, Anglo, nonbinary, queer design educator whose early practice was shaped by Christian cultural norms, colonial assumptions, and a saviour-oriented design mentality. Through decolonial critique, I have reoriented my practice toward dismantling oppressive systems and supporting self-determination. I now position the designer as a storyteller who enables situated knowledge to circulate and be rescripted.

Muireann: My middle-class upbringing as a white Irish female and my long academic career shape how I teach and understand Product Design. My educational values are grounded in the social purpose of teaching, yet I remain aware that my worldview frames, and potentially limits, how I engage with, assess and support students. I continue to question how subjective experiences intersect with the possibility of fair, meaningful, and varied learning experiences.

Ceri: I am a white, British, male, Product Design educator shaped by early training in market driven, Western design traditions, now working within institutional structures that both shape and constrain my teaching. My interests in low-tech, care oriented, and sustainability focused design inform how I read and question design curricula. I offer my perspective as one situated voice, contributing to collective reflection rather than definitive judgment.

3 FINDINGS (CROSS-INSTITUTIONAL THEMES)

Comparative interrogation of the authors' positionality statements and their respective programme structures enables discussion of the current state of product design education within an Irish context. The three lenses: reflect, reproduce, challenge, allow examination of how colonial-industrial heritage persists, adapts, or is contested within these distinct programmes. These lenses are not mutually exclusive stages but concurrent conditions which operate within and across the education landscape.

3.1 Reflect

Across all three universities, product design education reflects a Western industrial understanding of knowledge, which has been developed alongside narratives that emphasise technological progress with concepts on the universalisation of problem-solving. While each programme occupies a distinct location within its university's organisational structure, all are shaped by inherited models of design rooted in European modernity. This includes framing the design process around the British Design Council's Double Diamond model [11] and IDEO's Three Lenses of Innovation [12]. These inherited models are visible in theory and history classes, studio formats and their related pedagogies and the progress models that structure students' understanding of what counts as legitimate design thinking.

By founding pedagogy on these models, the institutions continue to centre patriarchal value systems and colonial-settler cultures, which are 'out of place' with the liberatory struggles against colonialism within Ireland and the contradictory lived realities of colonisation produced by the Irish diaspora; as descendant from, or ancestor to, or currently living populations under colonial occupation whilst, simultaneously, actively resisting the occupations of Indigenous lands across the globe [13]. Ireland's design pedagogy and industry is inherently reflective of the nation's wider dual position as simultaneously resisting and relying upon colonial laws, politics, and economics.

The authors apply a critical approach to their institutional pedagogy, attempting to bypass rigid structures by reframing module content and teaching 'speaking between the lines' of dominant models. However, critical design approaches that are presented as tools for resistance can often reproduce the very structures they seek to critique. Without true systemic structural reorganisation, design educators can continue to reproduce the colonial structures that the Irish diaspora are complicit within and perpetuates reductive narratives of Irish interactions with colonialism; focused on post-colonial perspectives that seemingly ignore Ireland's transition from one white polity to another, cultivating a history of exercising whiteness and nationalism as independence from colonialism without any formal actions towards decolonisation and new kinds of governance founded in Irish Indigeneity [14].

Given the situation each programme finds itself in, reflection does not imply endorsement; rather, it signals structural continuity. Increasingly, the programmes demonstrate awareness (even if not explicitly stated) of the boundaries of Eurocentric definitions of design, yet the foundations upon which curricula, assessment strategies, and the professional industries to which the programmes align continue to operate within a pattern formed by these industrial and colonial histories. Even where contextual awareness has expanded, Western assumptions remain architectural to Irish Product Design Education, which continues to reflect these narratives, not through explicit ideological framing but rather through non-reflective inheritance. To critique continued colonial influences on Irish design pedagogy and practice we must, firstly, invite new critical perspectives and other ways of knowing and doing into the space between coloniality and decoloniality, which currently reproduces and maintains colonial design ontologies.

3.2 Reproduce

If reflecting on our programmes describes inheritance, then considering how we reproduce knowledge could provide insight into how we have continued to stabilise it and how we can, potentially, dismantle it. Developing programme coherence, building studio culture, replicating assessment strategies, and seeking professional accreditation collectively reproduce dominant knowledge paradigms, at least procedurally, if not intentionally.

In two of the three programmes, studio-based pedagogy is central to identity formation and forms a core spine of the programmes in UL and TUD. Through critique, interrogation, iteration and dialogue, students learn to articulate and defend practice. In contrast, MU has cultivated a pseudo-studio culture where fieldwork and practical labs are the primary influence on design practice. This is not a purposeful pedagogical choice but is due to real-world limitations on studio space that dictate student-lecturer and student-student relationships. In the place of studio activities, fieldwork encourages students to apply ethnographic research methods through design-specific discourses whilst labs encourage practical experimentation within varying design methodologies, through which students also learn to articulate and defend their personal practice.

In either case, studio culture or fieldwork/lab culture is not neutral. Confidence, flexibility and cultural formality can act as tacit markers of legitimacy. Assessment approaches may reinforce these norms, often privileging coherence, feasibility and viability as indicators of “good” design. Even where educators seek to encourage risk-taking, experimentation and norm-breaking, institutional commitments to authentic assessment and structured grading systems create pressures towards professional legibility. While authentic assessment is frequently positioned as progressive pedagogy, its alignment with existing professional standards may unintentionally privilege culturally dominant forms of legibility and practice.

A programme's “home” within a university will also shape reproduction. Those programmes embedded within engineering or business faculties often align metrics of success with measures of employability and industry relevance. Although this alignment is not inherently conservative, indeed, it provides learners with clearly defined and signposted pathways toward professional practice, it does also reinforce a singular vision of what design does and who it is for.

3.3 Challenge

All three programmes are making strides to challenge, but this rarely manifests in radical change to the structure or institutions. Instead, decolonial and ethical shifts arise primarily through insertion alongside traditional structures, recalibration of existing content, and strategic subversion within inherited frameworks. Indeed, efforts to include pre-colonial knowledges within design discourses is a task mostly taken up by Indigenous scholars as protective acts [15] that ‘speak between the lines’ of a dominant discourse, aimed at tackling censorship using various discursive devices such as allegory, parody, and reduction to create a hidden layer of meaning within design discourse that can only be understood by certain people [16].

Noel [1] exemplifies a more direct decolonial approach that does not try to avoid the censorship of pre-colonial knowledges but, instead, confronts and subverts the power dynamics central to censorship by explicitly reframing colonial models as vehicles for decolonisation. MU adopts a similar approach by directly questioning and reinterpreting the ARRIVE framework [18], overlaying seven decolonial strategies that better reflect design’s changing role in a transitional Ireland. However, there is no institutional support for such actions, as they challenge the colonial values on which the institution is built. As a result, “working between the lines” of existing structures remains the primary route for critical pedagogical practice.

In the TUD programme, low-tech approaches and framing of materiality of practice act as ethical provocations within the structured studio are used to question narratives of growth and sufficiency without undoing the programme's industrial orientation. In the UL programme, practice is developing through increasing contextual awareness and the reframing of design as culturally situated rather than universally neutral. At MU, the absence of a studio spine to the programme and staff transition has produced what might be described as productive disorder, enabling justice-oriented content and pluriversal perspectives to enter the curriculum through diverse staff specialisation.

Conventional module titles are retained while content is reframed and dominant design models are taught as breakable rather than prescriptive. University hierarchies are subverted to protect studio culture through altered and negotiated timetabling and the reversing of granularization through the sharing of

project-based learning across multiple modules. These strategies reveal that challenging is often individual-led and dependent on lecturer relationships and positionality. While such practices create spaces of resistance, they remain embedded within the same assessment systems and institutional architectures that stabilise inherited epistemologies. Decolonisation, therefore, appears less as a conscious replacement and more as a layered intervention.

4 DISCUSSIONS (BEYOND EDI)

Ireland emerges as a particularly complicated and interesting site through which to interrogate the intersections of design, knowledge systems and inherited power structures. Its history of colonisation positions it simultaneously inside and outside dominant Euro-centric epistemologies, creating a context in which identity, sovereignty, and cultural production remain in constant negotiation. This instability positions Ireland not as a fixed or settled terrain but as an evolving epistemic space, where confusion, discomfort, and productive discordance may operate not as weaknesses but as generative conditions. Such states of uncertainty can create openings for alternative voices, situated knowledges, and less-established design practices to emerge, particularly when educators consciously frame unlearning as an ongoing, shared pedagogical experience. Embracing these ruptures challenges the presumption that design education must be orderly, linear, or tied to inherited logics of industrial progress; instead, it invites a pluriversal understanding of design practice that acknowledges multiplicity rather than seeking consensus.

Laying bare the 'productive disorder' of MU's design programme provides potential to deconstruct disciplinary norms and re-examine the definition of design knowledge itself [19]. Diverse academic backgrounds and marginalised perspectives contribute alternative viewpoints, while strong peer-to-peer learning fosters pluriversal ways of knowing grounded in students' own lived experiences.

The legacy of coloniser culture inherent within Irish institutional structures may inadvertently provide the disorder required to catalyse decolonial actions that resist reproducing colonial logics, and hold space for contradiction, negotiation, and dissent. Within this shifting landscape, questioning what forms of knowledge ought to be legitimised within Irish institutions, whose perspectives shape our curricula, and how pedagogical structures can evolve to accommodate pluriversal ways of knowing, making and being, take on a renewed urgency. Questioning the very notion of what constitutes the design discipline also marks a transition towards new epistemic modes that reimagine design education in Ireland as relational, situated, and culturally grounded- respectful of history, responsive to the present, and open to emergent futures.

5 CONCLUSIONS

This paper does not attempt to conclude the question of decolonisation within Irish design education but seeks to surface the tensions and contradictions that shape it. Decolonisation is not a singular act of curricular replacement but an ongoing negotiation within institutional structures and hierarchies that remain structurally embedded in epistemologies of the Global North. Ireland's history of colonisation does not exempt it from participating in colonial knowledge systems; rather, it complicates how responsibility should be understood.

Ireland's unsettled position within colonial history creates not clarity but a form of productive instability, and within this dissonance, there is room for a plurality of voices to emerge. Such plurality requires moving beyond academic positionality to engage directly with student experiences and the lived realities of those navigating these programmes. The present work, therefore, serves as a reflexive beginning, establishing a baseline for further investigation into how students articulate belonging, exclusion and possibility within Irish Product Design education.

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