

PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE – REFLEXIVITY AND EDI

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically examines identity construction in design education through the Professional Practice module on the BSc Product Design at Technological University Dublin (TU Dublin), situating it within contemporary debates on Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI). The module foregrounds transformative and reflective practice facilitated through transdisciplinary discourse. It positions professional identity as a fluid, negotiated and contextually situated construct informed by socialisation, ethical reflection and worldview formation. From this perspective, professional identity formation reveals how dominant disciplinary narratives can marginalise alternative epistemologies and lived experiences. By emphasising reflective and student-centred pedagogies, the module cultivates reflexivity as a core element of professional development, enabling students to interrogate the diverse values, voices and needs that inform design practice. Through structured critical dialogue, conventional hierarchies are challenged, advancing a pluralistic model of design professionalism that embraces EDI as integral to creative and ethical practice. The paper argues that this Professional Practice module offers a framework for reimagining professional identity as inclusive, dynamic and ethically grounded. It reconceives design education not merely as accommodating diversity, but as embedding equity and inclusion within the epistemological and moral fabric of students’ future professional selves.

Keywords: Professional identity, design theory, design education, reflexivity, diversity, equity and inclusion

1 INTRODUCTION

Across Engineering and Product Design education, the development of professional identity is increasingly linked to wider debates about Equity, Diversity and Inclusion. While design programmes have traditionally prioritised technical competence and creativity, scholars emphasise that designers’ worldviews, values and social positions shape the ways they frame problems, recognise stakeholders and evaluate possible solutions [1–3]. Professional identity is not a fixed or neutral construct but emerges through participation in educational practices, institutional cultures, social discourses and critical reflection [4,5]. Consequently, design education is not only about skills and techniques; it is also a socialising force that orients students toward particular norms, paradigms and ethical positions [6,7].

The subject of this research is the student reflections on debates around the topic of EDI that are part of the Professional Practice module delivered in the final semester of their four-year BSc Product Design at TU Dublin. At this point in the programme the students have embedded both breadth and depth into their knowledge of design-based discourse. It should be noted that all these students have engaged in modules covering Universal Design in earlier years and therefore have both insight and vocabulary around the subject. This paper draws on the reflections of the thirty-two students who engaged in the discussions on EDI and is part of a much broader five-year longitudinal study of identity formation through debate and reflective practice.

This case study of classroom discussion reveals both scepticism and endorsement of EDI, generating productive tensions that contribute to students’ professional identity formation.

Three key arguments structure this paper. First, reflexivity as a sustained critical awareness of self, context and power helps support students in reframing EDI as an epistemic lens that shapes design processes. Second, the designer’s role can be understood as that of a translator and mediator, whose work benefits from diverse voices and perspectives. Third, embedding EDI within learning environments facilitates a pluralistic conception of design professionalism that positions inclusion as an ethical and creative imperative. The paper contributes to pedagogical literature by linking professional

identity formation to EDI-oriented reflexivity and by offering practical implications for educators seeking to embed inclusion within professional practice curricula.

2 BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE

2.1 Professional Identity in Design Education

Professional identity describes how individuals see themselves in relation to their profession, encompassing skills, values, ethical commitments and ways of belonging [4]. In design education, identity emerges through rituals of critique, iterative project work, collaboration and immersion in studio culture [2]. Learning is situated and relational: designers develop their identity through interactions with peers, tutors, clients and communities, all which shape what they come to view as legitimate knowledge or good practice [7,8].

Schön's concept of the reflective practitioner [1] is foundational here, emphasising reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action as mechanisms through which professionals navigate ambiguous problems. At the same time, dominant disciplinary norms such as commitments to universality, objectivity or minimalist aesthetics, can limit the visibility of alternative knowledge systems, especially when homogeneity in academic settings reinforces narrow standards of legitimacy [6,3]. Recognising professional identity as fluid and negotiated, highlights the importance of reflexive pedagogies that engage students with ethics, inclusion and socio-cultural complexity.

2.2 Reflexivity and Critical Pedagogy

Reflexivity involves situating oneself within broader social structures and questioning how positionality shapes perception and decision-making [9,10]. It requires students not only to reflect on their actions but also to interrogate assumptions, power relations and the interests served by particular design approaches. Freire's critical pedagogy [11] underscores the role of dialogue and co-constructed knowledge in developing critical consciousness. This perspective is echoed in contemporary design education approaches that emphasise iterative critique, peer learning and cross-disciplinary engagement [12,13].

Reflexive practice strengthens technical knowledge by situating it within complex ethical and social contexts. It enables students to recognise how biases, disciplinary assumptions and institutional norms shape what designers notice or ignore. In this way, reflexivity is foundational to inclusive design practice.

2.3 EDI as an Epistemic and Methodological Orientation

Although EDI is often framed in organisations as a recruitment or hiring concern, design research shows that inclusion directly affects innovation by influencing problem framing and decision-making [3,14]. Human-centred and co-design methods promote participatory engagement and contextual sensitivity [15,16], while design justice frameworks explicitly foreground power redistribution and community leadership [3]. Inclusive and Universal Design approaches extend considerations of human variation and environmental fit [17,18]. EDI therefore functions as both a design constraint and a creative driver. It constrains by requiring attention to people who have historically been marginalised and also drives innovation by revealing latent needs and broadening the scope of possible solutions [19]. From this viewpoint, EDI becomes part of design epistemology itself.

2.4 Meritocracy, Equity and Structural Inequality

Debates about quotas and meritocracy often assume that selection environments are neutral. Research demonstrates that systemic inequalities which range from educational access to networking opportunities can distort perceptions of merit [20]. Studies across sectors reveal persistent implicit and explicit biases in hiring [21,22], challenging claims that current practices reliably identify the most capable candidates. EDI initiatives seek not to lower standards but to counterbalance accumulated disadvantages and broaden pathways to excellence.

Design classrooms provide important spaces to critically engage these tensions. Grappling with competing values such as individual fairness versus systemic fairness enables students to develop ethical reasoning skills central to professional identity formation [5].

3 PEDAGOGICAL APPROACHES: PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE AT TU DUBLIN

The Professional Practice module position's identity work and reflexivity as essential to developing design professionalism. Its aims include fostering critical self-awareness, embedding EDI as a defining component of design professionalism, developing communication and mediation skills and enabling students to challenge homogenising narratives in design culture.

The module employs a flipped classroom methodology that combines pre-class engagement with theory through curated readings and critical prompts. Active in-class participation, structured reflection and the effective use of technology creates a comprehensive and dynamic learning environment.

Through a structured critical dialogue, students examine assumptions about meritocracy, cultural representation, bias, stakeholder power and the responsibilities of designers in diverse contexts. This flipped classroom approach uses a café format as the debating metaphor. [23]

Using Mezirow's theory of transformative learning for the design of this café format and discussions, proved to enable students negotiate and reframe their positionality. A central tenet of this particular flipped classroom intervention is the student reflection which not only deepens the students' understanding of the course materials but also informs and consolidates their emergent personal and professional identity. It fosters critical self-reflection, personal growth, a clearer sense of identity and responsible citizenship, making it a convincing model for contemporary education.

Drawing from design theory, sociology, ethics, philosophy and organisational studies, the module's transdisciplinary approach encourages students to connect micro-level design decisions with macro-level structural factors [9,12]. This integrative pedagogy supports long-term, reflexive identity development. The module draws upon established literature on cultivating reflective practice, identity construction and epistemic pluralism. Students engage in situated reflexivity [8,10], practice dialogic learning through facilitated debate [11], explore multiple ways of knowing including lived experience and community knowledge [7,3] and translate this into ethically grounded design action informed by user-centred and inclusive design standards [15,17,18].

4 CASE STUDY AND THEMATIC ANALYSIS

4.1 Case Study Overview

A focal classroom debate on EDI provided insight into students' developing identities and assumptions. Discussion explored EDI beyond employment and recruitment issues to include design methods, aesthetic norms, cultural representation, systemic bias and the designer's role. Student contributions ranged from scepticism, particularly around perceived threats to merit, to strong support for EDI as integral to ethical design. The thematic analysis below (Figure 1) synthesises recurring patterns in the discussion.

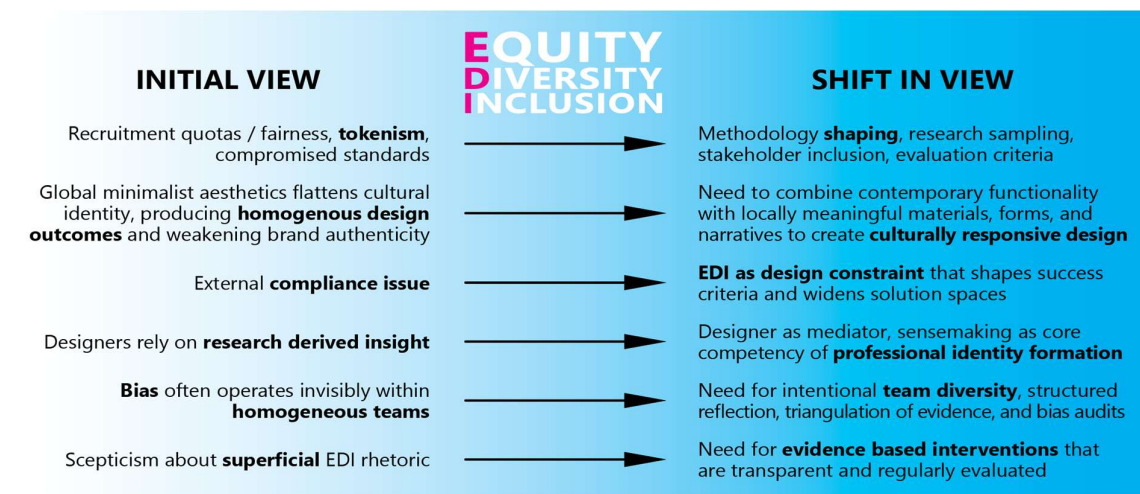


Figure 1. Shift in students' views of EDI after exploring deeper impact of EDI within design practice

4.2 EDI Debates

The following insights have been gathered from the written reflections on the student's own experience and learning from the classroom debates on EDI. Initially, many students associated EDI primarily with recruitment quotas and recruitment fairness. This narrow interpretation mirrored common organisational narratives and generated concerns about tokenism or compromised standards. As dialogue progressed, students began reframing EDI as a design methodology shaping question formation, research sampling, stakeholder inclusion and evaluation criteria. This 'upstream' perspective helped students recognise that inclusion affects the very definition of design problems and the validity of findings. The shift from recruitment focused EDI to process focused EDI marked a significant conceptual development.

Debates around meritocracy revealed conflicting intuitions. Some students viewed quotas as potentially unfair or undermining competence. Others emphasised that merit is socially shaped, not objectively measured and that structural inequalities distort who appears most capable [20]. Through facilitated discussion, students developed more nuanced views: equity measures can be legitimate tools in specific contexts, provided they are transparent, competency-based and designed to avoid tokenism. This exercise supported ethical-practical reasoning about competing contexts. [22].

Students articulated concerns that global minimalist aesthetics flatten cultural identity, producing homogenous design outcomes and weakening brand authenticity. They explored possibilities for combining contemporary functionality with locally meaningful materials, forms and narratives, aligning with situated and culturally responsive design scholarship [7,8]. These reflections highlighted the importance of aesthetic pluralism as an expression of inclusive design practice.

Students increasingly saw EDI not as an external compliance issue but as a design constraint that shapes success criteria and widens solution spaces. They recognised that many supposedly Universal Design principles reflect western or normative assumptions that may not transfer across cultures or user groups [18]. Inclusive and Universal Design were understood as directional commitments rather than absolute goals, with attention to edge cases often generating innovations beneficial to broader populations [17,19].

Students debated whether diverse user groups must be directly represented in design teams or whether designers can rely on research-derived insights. Most concluded that lived experiences and professional translation skills are complementary. Designers act as mediators who synthesise diverse insights into coherent requirements and testable design propositions [1,14]. These reframing positions communication and sensemaking as core competencies of professional identity.

Students acknowledged that bias often operates invisibly within homogeneous teams, contributing to group thinking and missed insights. Strategies such as intentional team diversity, structured reflection, triangulation of evidence and bias audits were proposed as mechanisms for surfacing blind spots [18]. While some expressed scepticism about superficial EDI rhetoric, most accepted the need for evidence-based interventions that are transparent and regularly evaluated [21].

Students recognised that early-career professionals may have limited influence over organisational policy but still identified pathways for contributing to change, including building alliances, pursuing incremental improvements and developing policy literacy. This pragmatism aligns with research that conceives professional identity as a long-term, context-responsive process supported by reflexive habits [1,4].

5 DISCUSSION AND OBSERVATIONS

5.1 From Accommodation to Epistemic Integration

A central insight emerging from the module is students' shift from viewing EDI as an accommodation, simply making space for difference within existing structures, to epistemic integration, where inclusion informs foundational decisions about what counts as knowledge, evidence and success. Embedding EDI upstream remodels design reasoning in ways consistent with situated and participatory design paradigms [7,14]. The classroom debate provided students with opportunities to recognise this reorientation.

5.2 Negotiating Merit and Equity Without Tokenism

The merit versus equity debate illustrated a widespread misconception: that fairness to individuals and fairness within systems are mutually exclusive. When structural inequalities shape access to resources and opportunities, meritocratic outcomes cannot be achieved without corrective measures [6,24]. The pedagogical challenge is to help students distinguish critiques of specific mechanisms, such as quotas,

from blanket rejections of inclusion. Developing policy literacy supports ethically grounded professional judgement [22].

5.3 Mediation as Core Professional Competence and Reflexivity as Ongoing Praxis

Reconceptualising the designer as mediator integrates technical, communicative and ethical skills. This aligns with Schön's reflective practitioner model [1] and Wenger's theory of participation [2]. Communication, translation and synthesis increasingly emerge as first-order competencies in inclusive design toolkits [18]. This identity orientation helps prepare students for complex, multi-stakeholder contexts.

Reflexivity is not just a discrete learning activity but an ongoing professional commitment. The flipped classroom supports this by providing iterative opportunities for dialogue, counter-examples and structured reflection. Students noted that meaningful influence requires strategic patience and collaborative action. Reflexive identity work equips graduates to adapt responsibly under conditions of uncertainty [9,10].

6 LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE WORK

Professional Identity formation is an important part of the educational journey of product design students. The case study outlined in this paper represents one element of a five-year longitudinal study which looks at identity formation and ways to support students in shaping their professional values and beliefs to prepare them for their professional careers.

This analysis is based on one classroom intervention from a single module within one institutional context, limiting generalisability. Classroom discussions may include social desirability effects and inform both individuals and groups through socially constructed reflective narrative. Future work could involve longitudinal studies tracking graduates' application of reflexive EDI practices in workplace settings and comparative research across programmes and institutions could illuminate contextual effects. Additional empirical work using coded reflection journals or learning analytics could further investigate how reflexive engagement contributes to improved design outcomes and team performance. This case is based on outputs from year three of a five-year longitudinal study on identity formation and further findings will be published in the future. This study was structured from early pedagogic research work undertaken by one of the authors. [25]

7 CONCLUSIONS

The Professional Practice module at TU Dublin demonstrates how reflexivity can reorient students' understanding of EDI from a narrow HR-focused issue to an epistemic and methodological foundation of design professionalism. Discussions about meritocracy, cultural identity, bias and the designer's mediating role highlight the complexity of embedding EDI within real design practice. Rather than providing definitive answers, the module equips students to navigate this complexity with ethical awareness and creative agency.

A pluralistic model of design professionalism, grounded in reflexivity, evidence-based reasoning and aesthetic diversity, provides a robust foundation for contemporary design practice. In this model, professional identity becomes dynamic, inclusive and ethically grounded and design education evolves from simply accommodating diversity to embedding equity and inclusion within the ways designers learn, decide and act.

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