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Cindy R. Darbandi  
*The Open University*

Ida Rodrigues  
*The Open University*

Nicole Lotz  
*The Open University*

Vera Hale  
*The Open University*

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Empathy Board: co-designing and decolonising curriculum in distance design education

Cindy R. DARBANDI  
The Open University - Student Intern  
cindyrdarbandi@icloud.com

Ida RODRIGUES  
The Open University - Student Intern  
idarodrigues61@gmail.com

Nicole LOTZ  
The Open University  
nicole.lotz@open.ac.uk

Vera HALE  
The Open University  
vera.hale@open.ac.uk

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Abstract: The paper focuses on the collaborative process of co-designing curriculum with students and academics at a distance. It documents the creation and analyses the use of a virtual collaborative space in Miro, called the Empathy Board, and examines what impact such a space may have on our efforts to decolonise the design curriculum. The case is constructed in collaborative autoethnography giving equal voice to both student interns and academic authors alike. Two examples of decolonising curriculum highlight the key processes of gaining trust and empathy between the collaborators. We found that the Empathy Board promotes reflexivity and dialogue by bringing intersecting identities into the virtual collaboration process. Engaging as a whole person and with openness to vulnerabilities supports the decolonisation process of our curriculum with student interns and academics as equal partners.

Keywords: co-design; design curriculum; decolonisation; Empathy Board

Introduction

In 2022, a virtual internship programme was established at the Open University (OU). It invites current design students with protected characteristics at the OU to support central academics with the production of modules and other activities, this included the co-design of a new bachelor’s in design qualification. The focus of the internships is to work from the students’ lived experiences to create more inclusive curricula. The programme is in its second year which facilitated the hire of two interns per year. The interns work closely with a team of eleven academics, two of which supervise, mentor, and line manage the interns over a period of three to six months.
This paper is co-authored with two interns from the second cohort of virtual interns, one intern being the first author of this paper and the second intern being the second author, with the supervisors being third and fourth authors respectively. Authors are referred to as such hereafter.

The first author is a design and business student and curriculum intern:

I noticed a clear disconnect between what the academics thought the students were achieving whilst studying the module materials and what the students understood of how a module is created. There were a multitude of decisions which have been made without consulting students. It was clear that there was a lack of communication and co-creation which resulted in the lack of representation due to the dominance of views of the global north in design education.

The second author is a design and business student and curriculum intern:

What I encountered during my studies and my diverse background influenced how I overcame many hardships. I wanted to share my knowledge to develop a more inclusive curriculum and promote wellbeing amongst students.

The third author is a design academic and supervisor for interns:

Over the past five years, I have increasingly worked with students in the co-creation of curriculum enrichment events. My goal has always been to include the voices of students with protected characteristics, based on their race, ethnicity, (dis)ability or socio-economic deprivation in the design of our curriculum.

The fourth author is a design academic and supervisor for interns:

Over the last eight years, my research has focused on the social aspects of sustainability within design, more specifically concentrated around critical pedagogies and the intersection of enabling, empowerment, and transformation for co-production of community activities.

Empathy, decolonisation, and empowerment: review of relevant literature

In ‘Pedagogies of the oppressed’ Freire (1970) argues for more dialogic engagement between students and educators as a form of critical pedagogy to achieve social transformation by highlighting the lived experiences of students, recognising the different stakeholders and how they can effect change (Johnson, 2000). Freire advocates co-created educational reform that is based on the experiential knowledge of students and the discipline knowledge of educators to strive for cultural synthesis and decolonisation of learning.

To become true partners to codesign the curriculum, there is a need to build empathy between student interns and teachers (Hubbard et al., 2020). This brings the lived experiences of students closer to educators, in line with decolonising critical pedagogy approaches (Carey, 2020). As well as this, using visual representation makes the motivations and experiences of both students and educators explicit, and humanises the process of designing curriculum (Semper & Blasco, 2018).

Supporting this critical pedagogy approach, in his concept of the ‘pluriverse’ Arturo Escobar (2018) refers to a world of many centres and voices, which contrasts with the single centre and voice generated by coloniality. Decolonisation of design education is hence the invitation to create or join spaces where multiple voices can speak and be heard. Ortiz Guzman (2017) identifies these [powerful stories to inspire change] as an equitable practice because it “places value on the personal and emotional, the contextual and specific (p. 29, as cited in Carey, 2020).” By changing the standpoint of the educators to those at the margins, they garner more insight on how things are truly experienced, which is a powerful feminist practice (Carey, 2020). Freire saw power as a creative, committed inquiry (Freire 1970, p. 72) that gives students and educators the means to become critical, and to see political and societal contradictions, empowering groups to transform their everyday lives (de Souza Briggs, 1998).

Critical pedagogy has inspired modern approaches to co-designing decolonised curricula and module materials with students with diverse lived experiences and backgrounds as partners (e.g. Hall, Velickovic, Rajapillai, 2020). Within design curricula, the focus of literature has been on decolonising design education with native communities and in Global South localities (see Ansari et al, 2018) or how drawing can facilitate the thinking of decolonising design curricula (Noel, 2021) but little has been published about co-creating design curricula with students with the aim to decolonise design education in a distance education context.
This paper focuses on creating a visual space for many voices in distance Higher Education, through the creation of an Empathy Board to capture lived experiences from the student interns and their academic supervisors and asking: How does the Empathy Board help virtual student interns and academics to collaborate as equals at a distance to decolonise the design curriculum?

**Methodology: An ethno-case approach**

Parker-Jenkins (2018) coined the phrase Ethno-Case study, to describe a case-study methodology using ethnographic techniques. Case-study research is a good methodology for describing and analysing an activity or process that is situated at a specific point in time and place (Creswell, 2007; Stake, 1995). It benefits from being interdisciplinary, and incorporates the complexity and richness of data, as well as having the opportunity to triangulate the data (Stake, 1995) using multiple methods. An Ethno-Case study as described by Parker-Jenkins is an approach that utilises ethnographic techniques to support the case study, helping focus data collection on the value of people and their narratives. Parker-Jenkins (2018) developed the new term because short-term case-studies ‘do not reach the threshold of long-term and sustained reflection’ that traditional ethnographic inquiry originally needed to be valid (2018, p. 29). However, she argues that due to new technologies data gathering has changed and therefore new understandings of the ethnography should be explored.

To develop the Ethno-Case, the team engaged in sustained reflection and dialogue. The case aimed at making all author voices visible in the text. We noted that this way of working is akin to collaborative auto-ethnography which is a “process of internal peer-reviewing [that] starts to form through data collection, analysis and interpretation sessions as the mutual scrutiny, interrogation and probing continues” (Roy & Uekusa, 2020, p. 388). Co-designing the use of the board, as well our responses on it, in fact facilitated the co-design to become effective collaborative research as it re-distributes power to disadvantaged or marginalised groups within society (Zamenopoulos & Alexiou, 2018).

**The case: The Empathy Board**

**Working collaboratively at a distance**

From the start of the virtual internship, the interns and academic supervisors met regularly online to agree objectives, tasks and share work accomplished. Each intern was asked to maintain an individual MIRO board to document their work. Interns met with the wider academic team twice a week online to understand the progress of curriculum design at the institution. In those meetings the interns were introduced to how the team operates and communicates.

Working virtually and at a distance with new members of a team is challenging, and even more so in a setting that could be characterised by hierarchical power relationships between academics and student interns. The interns felt that the academic team synchronous online meetings were not inclusive. The first and second authors perceived a language barrier that impacted on their participation. Despite completing previous modules, the academic team used additional and new terminology in those online discussions. While they seemed to participate by ‘being in the same room’, they felt an absence of true belonging because they were only seen as ‘students’. The student interns suffered from imposter syndrome, as both interns lacked history and experience of working within a design team. The first author set out to challenge this exclusion by introducing a new collaborative virtual work environment which forms the core of this ethno-case.

**The design of the Empathy Board**

The first author saw the need to develop a method to build authentic relationships and to establish empathy as a form of liberation and affinity amongst the collaborators. The first author noted:

> I was curious if there was a way to integrate all colleagues into one communication space, encouraging better communication whilst observing experiences, behaviours, and perceptions.

While the interns are design students, for the paid internship they are also colleagues to the academics. The board’s aim was to level the sense of power hierarchy that was still prevalent and construct a ‘virtual staff room’. A space to break spatial and communication barriers, that often is achieved in physically shared common space, where conversations and comments that are casually overheard or shared can bridge gaps between people. The board facilitated a means of co-design between the authors, to come together, to conceptually develop and create, to respond to specific issues and thus to improve the curriculum.
A weekly diary dashboard (Figure 1) was completed by the virtual student interns and academic collaborators on MIRO. They followed instructions and prompts and recorded their thoughts and experiences in their own words over a period of five months. The Board was not a planned design. The original aim of the Board was to visually collate thoughts, feelings, and actions, and collaborate between interns and supervisors in one online environment, to encourage discussion and communication beyond emails and wider team meetings.

The first week was a personalised pilot and tested by the first author to see if the chosen elements worked as intended: “During the second week, I presented the board to the wider academic team as an ongoing experiment, thus encouraging participation from others”. It was important that the Board was visual and quick to use, therefore the Board was optimised for simple and fun interactions using sticky notes, images and emojis. This contrasted with writing essays or reports for assignments and offered a change of pace. The first author was also inspired by the intersectionality of our identities and practices within the internship’s design space which would be revealed within the Board’s autoethnographic usage, or as Rittner (2022) described the black experience in design as complex, intersectional, and multidimensional unique stories (p. 38).

The Board captured the students’ culture in the representations of their lived experiences, thoughts and worries. It aimed at building the academics’ empathy with the minoritised students’ experience world to facilitate difficult conversations around exclusions, underrepresentation, and marginalisation. As the Board evolved it was named Empathy Board from week 3 of its use, to highlight the goal of developing empathy beyond its initial communication function. While the interns were invited onto the Design group academic space under the remit of the internship, the board invited the academics into a student-led safe space for decolonising the curriculum.

Figure 2 shows the board with its 15 distinct elements filled in within a working week. The board reads from top to bottom and left to right. The structure consists of three rows and four columns. The first column houses the first element (1) pertaining to the beginning of the week. The final element (12) is a self-reflection at the end of the week. Elements 13-14 were added a week into the diary to make collective notes of meetings. Element 15, Empathy Talking Points, was added in the third week.

Each section has its own implicit instructions as questions or prompts to encourage visual and emotional engagement. For instance, for the first element, Check In, the question is:
After the weekend and looking onto this week, I feel like ...

Then followed with explicit visually prompts to complete the section:

Post an expression of what you feel like here. It can be a word on a post-it, insert an image or a gif, or write a few words.

As with every section, there was a choice to use post-its, stickers, emojis, gifs or photographic images or a combination of the three. There have been instances of online links, google doc files, or reports etc., also being added to the Board to clarify entries and offer prompts for further discussion. Entries on the Board must have a name TAG for further identification and analysis. The weekly Board was duplicated to fill a row for a month over a period of five months from February to July 2023, the end of the internship.

The catalyst for the evolution of the Board

A difficult conversation around an African cover design of music by Fela Kuti (Figure 3) that was misrepresented in the curriculum was a pivotal moment in the emergence of the empathy focus of the board. The interns took notes on the Board representing their discussion and discomfort after reviewing the new curriculum being written. They tried to strategically place a conversation about their concerns and anticipate the academics’ reactions. The interns noted:

We weren’t sure how the scholars would perceive this revelation, but as a ‘minority’ we felt we needed to be brave enough to showcase our concerns and voice our opinion. The element ‘raise any concerns’ (Figure 2 element 9) seemed an “appropriate place to mention what we had spotted and discussed amongst ourselves.

The second author said: “At first glance, I was surprised and immediately happy to see African representation in the new curriculum, which is rare.” An album cover by Fela Kuti was used to exemplify the principle of dominance in compositions (Figure 3). “There was a sense of familiarity and relatability because I knew who this artist was, and I had heard of his stories, and the impact he has had within Nigerian culture”, continued the second author. However, when she compared the text describing this cover to other covers from western artists some key differences became

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1 The initial submission of this paper was set within the internship, as the board was still in progress and no post evaluations could be made from the boards, just reflections of the process.
apparent. Words of affirmation which repeatedly mention ‘iconic’ and ‘brilliant visuals’ used elsewhere were missing in the description of Fela Kuti’s album design. The second author continued:

There were two great stories involving the development of the album cover that I believe would have been ‘inspiring’ but also informational about the facts behind the development of this cover. In my point of view these facts would not only be a great example of how Africans oppose oppression through creativity and empowerment, but they also ensure ‘fair’ representation and create affirmations just like for the Western artists.

The misrepresentation demonstrates how creativity and expression from the Global South is perceived by the Global North. “There seems to be the need for ‘us’ Global South representatives to defend our content and how the content of it is used and perceived by others”, said the second author. We need to go beyond design language, we need to also translate design cultures. As Noel (2022) had:

began to question the global sameness of the curriculum and acknowledge what is lost when the richness of specific and local design cultures is marginalised and ignored. The sameness erased the cultural specificity that could make learning design more meaningful for students... (p. 278)

We began to interrogate the language that was used to describe curriculum content from the Global South, and we agree with Noel (2022) who proposed that an inclusive design curriculum needs to diversify cognitive and intellectual abilities rather than just produce inclusive artefacts or services. The second author recounts her lived experience of how a language barrier impacted written design assignments and progression through the qualification:

“It was unfortunate for me to have come to find out about glossaries at a late stage in my study. English is not my first language. I found it challenging to build confidence to communicate my ideas and express my thoughts to my tutor. I became apprehensive with thoughts of experiencing the same situation in next year’s module. I thought: ‘was design really for me?’

The second author suggested that a qualification wide multimodal (textual, visuals and auditory) glossary (Figure 4) is developed for the new design qualification to level the playing field. A glossary promotes design language and assists students to communicate their ideas using course related terminology. The glossary should also be added to by each student cohort.
Figure 4. A multimodal design glossary

Work on the curriculum glossary also influenced the Empathy Board usage. It eliminated the initial imposter syndrome felt by the interns during the first few online meetings with the whole design team. It gave space to create a shared language, as there was an invisible power imbalance caused by the academic design team’s language used during synchronous meetings. The Board deliberately simplified language and shorter explanations including visual elements to equalise the dialogue.

Analysis of interactions on the Board

The analysis of the interactions with each element increased our understanding of how the Board developed empathy and trust between the interns and academics to be able to voice concerns. Noticeably, the Activity and Meeting record was most used, with 191 post-it notes (Figure 5, element 13). This element was added after our pivotal discussion outlined above. The board works in tandem with internship catch up online meetings which were used to set goals and objectives and discuss and monitor progress on tasks. The recording of the meetings facilitated conversations and discussions that may have gone unnoticed due to the choice of participants to keep the board as positive and motivational as possible in the beginning. This board element was used as an alternative channel to voice problems and issues. The first and second authors reacted together:

To be honest, we were unaware what the issues actually were. As with most people of colour, we are extremely wary of speaking up about diversity and equality issues due to fear of possible negative reprisals.

This element contributed most to the board’s overall usage together with Any Other Image (89 post-its) and Any Personal Thoughts (62 post-its) The first author commented on the latter:

I feel this was the section which facilitated the honesty on the Board, often contextualising the other comments made across the space. It was also the crossroad where students and academics could leave their titles behind and just be themselves creating a deeper understanding as human beings.
A surprising insight was the low use of section 15 Empathy Talking Points. This element was also added after the pivotal discussion. Here, the measurement of importance by ‘counting’ needs to be criticised. This section was mainly used by the first author, to summarise points of interest from the Activity and Meeting record, such as the Fela Kuti’s album cover issue. The first author states “although I was weary about speaking upfront, I made those thoughts public so busy academics were sure to see them”. While there was a low number of interactions with this element it produced a collective impetus to construct this ethnographic case.

**Discussion**

We have asked the question: How does the Empathy Board help virtual student interns and academics to collaborate as equals at a distance to decolonise the design curriculum? Through analysing the Board content, we discovered recurring themes that fell broadly into three categories:

**Co-design and collaboration: being honest, feeling safe and whole**

First and foremost, the Empathy Board revealed where we work, who with and what on, augmenting the faces on screens in online meetings. It captured how the Interns coped with studying and working pressures, which created an awareness of availability to actively collaborate during certain times, e.g., assignments. This created empathy not only for understanding whether a team member was available to work this week, but also how students cope with studying
at a distance in general. These authentic lived experiences give insights that can be used in the design of a more equitable curriculum. An expected theme of the Board was its intended use - to support collaboration between Interns and academics during the co-design of curriculum at a distance. The first author notes:

> My internship began with a separate MIRO workspace. I questioned whether working alone created better ideas for novel curriculum? It was important that the collective space be very multi-sensual, offering encounters for further conversation, sparking idea generation for collaborative working.

The board allowed continuous asynchronous working together within one virtual workspace. The third author likened the board to a design studio. “It makes the implicit explicit, which makes issues harder to ignore and it offers a space for chance encounters and conversations to emerge.” The extent to which we enjoyed revealing our respective physical and virtual workspaces and practices in a visual way was surprising though. It made the issues discussed urgent and important. Over time, we developed trust in being open with each other about how we feel and what we think. This openness in collaboration is difficult to achieve at a distance, and the Empathy Board worked as a catalyst.

We understood that we have created a shared space which felt safe enough for honest interactions. The board empowered us and reassured us that no comments made, had been spoken out of place. There is also a sense of belonging and encouragement for further interaction within the board. The board was co-created as an artefact of equality. It is an equal measure of shared expertise and lived experience. The board has become a catalyst for decolonising curriculum, including how to create a shared language (glossary) and how to challenge misinterpreted curriculum content from the Global South.

**Intersecting identities: feeling represented, emancipated and empowered**

Originally, the board set out to be an evaluation space and evolved into an academic reflection space for honest conversations including intersectional differences, wellbeing, and decolonising course content. Hooks (2003) argued “conversation is the central location of pedagogy for the democratic educator” (p. 44). “Diversity and inclusion prevail when we recognise that we are all multifaceted [...] complex in our experiences and expressions of identity”, Rittner (2017 p. 17) adds. It is this ‘wholeness’, “whole human beings, striving not just for knowledge in books, but knowledge about how to live in the world” (Hooks 1994, pp. 14-15). Hooks adds in 2003 the “democratic educators who champion bringing an end to biassed ways of teaching bridge the gap between the academic and the so called ‘real’ world” (p. 46). The first author recognised that “this is a seed for empathic collaboration in my own journey for change in the design curriculum which includes improved diverse representation in design.”

Rittner (2017, 2020) makes a case for a reform of design education to address honestly and holistically the complex realities in design and lived experiences of design students. Although the Empathy Board invites all participants to collectively reflect on their intersectional identities, reviewing personal performance, positive or negative, the discovery of the misrepresented album cover was a catalyst for much more honest conversations: “I made the conscious decision to show all of myself on the Board, including my failings.” Showing complexity and vulnerability opened the space to encourage participants to be their authentic selves of wholeness (Hooks, 2003). The third author added that: “In order to have honest conversations, you also need to be honest with yourself and sometimes the only thing standing between healing, growth and understanding is an uncomfortable conversation”. Empathising with the whole person, not just as a colleague or student, equalised the power relationships between participants regardless of title or role on the team.

Rittner furthermore suggested that the diverse students affected by the design curriculum should be involved in the design process of creating a new version (2020, p. 14). The Empathy Board case goes further than that. An intern invited design academics into the space she created, furthering a collegial relationship within the internship. Consequently, to encourage decolonisation of the developing curriculum requires students to become not only co-producers and partners but emancipatory agents who drive initiatives. This is also supported by Lima (2021) who wrote: “I believe it is experimenting and conceiving new practices that major changes will be made in the larger enterprise of decolonising design” (p. 152). She also states that “the human and non-human dimensions of relationships are a priority when advancing towards decolonising design” (Lima, 2021, p. 516).

What kind of relationships does the Board support? The second author describes the Board as a “sustained mentoring relationship”. She compared it to how Serafini et al. (2022) describe intersectionality as a sisterhood framework to understand our individual and collective experiences as women. The fourth author observed that “The board has developed a habitable consciousness revolving around what can be shared within a small space, it is precise and deliberate in its intended interactions.” The first author argued: “Everyone has and is ‘valued’ within the working
relationship; the board makes people ‘visible’ with their contributions”. During the beginning of the internship, the first author reflected that “my student and race identity at that point was a hindrance to fit in.” We, the first and second author, did not have the desired impact for which we were hired - to use our lived experiences to co-create a more inclusive curriculum. Rittner states, “cultural hegemony breeds not just collaboration but complicity, as our peers are taught not to honour their intersectional differences, their multidimensionality but to prioritise fitting in” (2022 p. 41). The board was designed to be the opposite, to celebrate intersectional differences in a very visual manner and still fit in. We felt that our multi-dimensionality and pluralism created a “radical openness” (Hooks, 2003 p. 48). Reading Carey’s (2020) anti-oppression approaches to collaboration, we were reassured that while such openness can be very uncomfortable, it is important that this process continues. The next chapter of the Empathy Board has already begun when the interns returned as consultants and the Board evolved to become the Third Space consultancy board.

Decolonising curriculum: a process of reflexivity and dialogue

The open interactions on the board revealed to us assumptions, bias, prejudices, and racism in our design curriculum and in the process of designing our curriculum. When the misrepresentation of Fela Kuti’s album cover was brought to the academic’s attention on the board, the discussion moved on to an Inclusive Curriculum Tool that had been developed by the institution. Author three suggested that using the tool, because of its official status, might be an avenue to report on the misrepresentation without making the critique too personal. But rightly so, the move was perceived as tokenism. Author two questioned: “Apparently, there’s a procedure one must follow when bringing up these issues with instructions and further questions to attend to that feel more like tokenism than resolution.” Schulz et al. (2018) write about tokenistic decolonisation: “it is all too easy for people who possess a great deal of cultural capital to make the token gesture of learning a new set of terms or adding a few different texts or examples to the curriculum” (p. 82). They continue to question whether token inclusion is better than no inclusion? The root problem is that decolonisation demands a “sense of purpose and dedication” they continue... and we agree that this implies a far more “radical and substantive redesigning of the dominant cultures of design practice” (p. 82)

Reflecting on tokenism and the real needs of students, the Board helped us to test out alternative learning designs, such as co-creating a multimodal Design Glossary to overcome language barriers. Without this bottom-up dialogue we could not have developed empathy with each other. Creating empathy with colleagues at a distance is inherently difficult, even more so when the lived experiences differ dramatically, such as based on racialised oppression and academic power structures. Mazzarotto and Serpa (2022) critically reflect that:

If empathy is ‘feeling the pain of others’, solidarity is about recognizing that pain, being in solidarity with it, and joining forces in the struggle to overcome it. It is about helping to strengthen people in the struggle against oppression, rather than keeping them out of the process just because you are ‘wearing their shoes’. (p. 9)

Our solidarity on the Board allowed us to reflect on our mistakes that were perceived as tokenisms and test ideas to undo oppressions. We agree with Schulz et al. (2018. p. 97) that decolonising design education requires not only ‘doing’ but also ‘undoing’ privileges of certain bodies while humanising others. In that we believe that empathy does not need to be seen as the opposite of solidarity but possibly a stepping stone that furthers reflexivity, dialogue and ultimately decolonisation (Carey, 2020).

Conclusions

This case exemplifies the process of decolonising our curriculum with a focus on language - correcting misrepresentation of African designs in teaching texts and creating a multimodal design glossary. It demonstrates how virtual interns and academics, working at a distance, can collaborate as equals and develop levels of trust and solidarity that lay the path for decolonising design education. We conclude that reflexivity and dialogue are key practices in the process of decolonising the design curriculum using an Empathy Board shared virtual space when collaborating at a distance. This aligns with critical pedagogy. Reflexivity and dialogue promote honesty and provide a degree of safety and trust to engage the as a whole person and with openness to vulnerabilities in the decolonisation process. The Empathy Board empowered us to have difficult conversations. The whole person is brought into the process by considering and honouring intersecting identities of the collaborators which validates all stories and knowledge brought to the Empathy Board as equal. This empowered interns and the academics to collaborate as equals. We hope this case serves as an example to other educators encouraging the co-creation and decolonization of their curriculum with student interns as partners.
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About the Authors

Cindy R. Darbandi is a Design and Innovation undergraduate studying a multi-disciplinary Honours degree in Design Thinking and innovation approaches to Design alongside shaping strategic business opportunities at the Open University. Cindy is also a member of the OU’s student scholarship panel pertaining to the encouragement of STEM students evaluating the OU’s teaching and the improvement of learning practices.

Ida Rodrigues is a Design and Innovation Graduate at The Open University. With a multidisciplinary degree including (Engineering) origins, methods, framework, analysis, and production, and (Business) exploring innovation, entrepreneurship, and Creating futures in sustainable enterprises. Akin to deliver propositions with strategic design and innovation with entrepreneurial value to make it real.

Nicole Lotz is a Senior Lecturer in Design at The Open University, UK. She is interested in design processes, collaboration, and engagement across boundaries and at the margins. Nicole has published multiple articles across the disciplines of Design, Education, and International Development. She promotes the co-design of curriculum in design at a distance.

Vera Hale is a Lecturer in the Design Group at The Open University, UK. Her research interests are focused around enabling social sustainable and transformative design processes in the built environment. She has worked on multiple AHRC-funded research projects that look at co-design and participatory practices within spatial practice.