

# Unveiling Diversity: Decolonizing and Disrupting First-Year Drawing Education

Cheri Hugo\*, Samuel Wicomb, Johannes Cronje

Department of Applied Design, Faculty of Design, Cape Peninsula University of Technology, South Africa

\* Corresponding author's email: hugoc@cput.ac.za

doi: <https://doi.org/10.21467/proceedings.168.17>

## ABSTRACT

The literature on decolonizing the curriculum highlights a significant distinction between diversity and decolonization. Diversity involves promoting the inclusion of various individuals in reading lists as well as the staff and student body. At the same time, decolonization goes further by dismantling colonial forms of knowledge, particularly practices that categorize and racialize people. This article presents an ongoing arts-based action research project conducted by the graphic design department of the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT) in South Africa (Cromhout, Duffett, & Steenkamp, 2021). The research program aims to revamp the department's historically Eurocentric curriculum using decolonisation and feminist theories. The primary goal is to integrate African design concepts into a predominantly Western pedagogical framework to acknowledge the valuable knowledge our diverse student body possesses. The main issue revealed through the collected data is the curriculum's overwhelming emphasis on a Western perspective, which fails to adequately consider our students' real-life experiences in the field of design in South Africa. Our study utilizes an asset-based approach to drawing (a topic covered in the Visual Communication Design curriculum) as a response, providing a platform for meaningful integration of indigenous knowledge. This study seeks to illuminate the subjective experiences of first-year students in the field, specifically focusing on how their indigenous knowledge is incorporated. Based on its findings, the study proposes embracing diversity and restructuring the education provided to students. It is driven by a commitment to valuing students' real-life experiences as it strives to guide them from the familiar to the unfamiliar in graphic design.

**Keywords:** Decolonization, Graphic Design Education, Arts-Based Action Research

## 1 Introduction

This instruction needs to be clarified and provide specific context or text to fix. Please provide the text or specify the parts that need editing. South Africa is described as one of the leading nations in Africa in terms of its economy and university education. It was formerly a British colony with foreign influence in its educational system (Nelson Mandela Foundation, 2004). Additionally, the high rate of dropouts from higher institutions of learning in the country is attributed to learning challenges experienced by students (Akoojee & Nkomo, 2008). The country experiences an annual dropout rate of approximately 40% (Macgregor, 2007). Several researchers have attributed this high dropout rate to various factors, including language and academic literacy skills, institutional cultures of higher learning, lack of infrastructural resources, university pedagogic systems, and neo-colonialism (Sawir, 2005; Wellman & Fallon, 2012). However, little consideration is given to the cultural and historical education background of the students and the nation as a whole, even though the educational policies of the country are mainly based on the pre-apartheid/apartheid education system (Nelson Mandela Foundation, 2004)" (Uleanya et al., 2017).

The famous quote from 1979 by Audre Lorde, "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house," (Love, 2016, p346) was made in response to a call for the inclusion of voices from marginalized groups such as the poor, Black, Third World, lesbian, and others (Lorde, 2017, pp1). Institutions have



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Proceedings DOI: [10.21467/proceedings.168](https://doi.org/10.21467/proceedings.168); Series: AIJR Proceedings; ISSN: 2582-3922; ISBN: 978-81-970666-6-5

adopted a deficit perspective when viewing students (Valencia, 2010, pp. 6-7), focusing on providing skills to make students' fit' for university life and success in higher education. However, more needs to be done to consider students' indigenous knowledge, which predates their tertiary education.

The Eurocentric perspective is still dominant in the South African higher education climate, and graphic design curricula specifically. Some studies have drawn attention to the fact that a Western design curriculum needs to sufficiently incorporate the African perspective (Carey, 2006; Ramoupi, 2012; Moalosi, 2007). However, in practice, the change has been slow. The lecturers need to move the student from the known to the unknown, but more is needed to validate students' lived experiences of design, instead valuing the Western model. Lewin and Mawoyo (2014) conducted a study in South Africa to examine the factors contributing to limited access to higher education. The study identified various obstacles that hinder students from completing their programs promptly. One significant issue identified was that the curriculum heavily favours Eurocentric perspectives, alienating students and exacerbating their challenges. The study employed arts-based action research methodology, decolonization theory, and feminist theories to explore decolonizing the Eurocentric curriculum in the Visual Communication Design department at CPUT. The study involved first-year students incorporating their cultural knowledge of design and drawing into various projects in the Drawing subject. Students expressed dissatisfaction with the limited representation of their real-world design experiences in the curriculum, and data collection focused on the predominantly Western perspective emphasized in the Drawing curriculum.

Education is a tool for societal growth and positive change (Nelson Mandela Foundation, 2014). However, the curricular structure, which includes factors such as starting level, assumptions about students' prior knowledge, duration, pace, flexibility of progression pathways, and exit level, has remained essentially unchanged since the colonial era in South Africa (CHE, 2013). This structure faces barriers to access and needs to adapt to significant social and economic changes in the country. As a result, academics in the design department are now seeking to revise the curriculum structure. Therefore, this study aims to explore how decolonizing and disrupting first-year drawing education can promote diversity. The study's synopsis includes the theoretical framework, research questions, methodology, presentation of results, Discussion of findings, recommendations, and conclusions.

## **2 Materials and Methods**

This study utilised an arts-based action research methodology to investigate the decolonization of the Eurocentric curriculum in the Graphic Design department at Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT) in South Africa. The study aimed to integrate indigenous knowledge into the curriculum to validate students' prior knowledge. Community research often uses arts-based methodologies to gain insight into participants' perspectives. This approach allows for exploring various viewpoints on relevant issues or concerns in different disciplines, drawing on various art forms (in this case, drawing). Therefore, arts-based action research is a crucial methodology for Visual Communication design as it places "conversation" and "participation" at the core of alternative knowledge generation methods (Kunt, 2019, p1).

The study participants included lecturers and first-year undergraduate students at Cape Peninsula University of Technology. The sample consisted of 40 first-year undergraduate students majoring in Visual Communication Design and two educators who taught the Drawing subject at the university. First-year students were selected for the study as they had limited exposure to campus culture and had not yet undergone industrial attachment or gained practical experience to complement their academic learning. The study utilized a cycle of action research. Qualitative data was gathered through samples of student work and reflective writing. The lecturers' perspectives were captured through student work samples, while

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reflective writing from the students provided quantitative data. The study aimed to explore how first-year drawing instruction at South African higher education institutions could be decolonized and disrupted to promote diversity, taking into account students' indigenous knowledge and cultural backgrounds within a predominantly Eurocentric curriculum.

Data was collected through drawing projects completed by the students. These projects examined how students experienced the subject and how their indigenous knowledge could be incorporated into the curriculum. Drawing projects were based on an asset-based approach, utilizing visual and arts-based methods to include indigenous knowledge. The data collected from the drawing projects was analysed using thematic analysis. The drawings and accompanying written reflections were coded and categorized into themes, which were then analysed in relation to the research questions and objectives of the study. The analysis focused on identifying how the students' drawings either challenged or reinforced the Eurocentric perspective promoted in the curriculum.

Ethical considerations were carefully addressed throughout the research process. Informed Consent was obtained from all participants before the study, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without facing any penalties. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the research process. The study received ethical clearance and adhered to the ethical guidelines set forth by Cape Peninsula University of Technology.

### **3 Theory and Calculation**

Decolonization theory is relevant for investigation, particularly considering the connection between the limited social changes/development experienced in South Africa and the learning difficulties that may be caused by foreign practices in South African colleges, particularly CPUT. Fanon (1952), one of the proponents of decolonization theory, views decolonization as a set of beliefs that support community, indigenous life, and epistemology. This is supported by Sium, Desai, and Ritskes (2012) (Uleanya *et al.*, 2017). They argue that colonial ways of thinking and behaving are always in conflict with the decolonization of African educational practices. However, decolonization requires a local starting point. In other words, decolonization can only occur when indigenous people value and implement their traditional ways in formal and informal settings (Alfred, 2009). According to Sawyer (2005), people learn more effectively when taught in their native language. Therefore, it follows that indigenous ideas and practices should be incorporated into the language of instruction and other activities in university systems.

The Nelson Mandela Foundation (2004) states that the policies governing South African institutions should not be based on the actions of the pre-apartheid/apartheid era. Decolonization theory supports this stance. However, the pre- and post-apartheid eras' policies continue to influence the current guidelines for the country's educational system. This helps explain some of the learning difficulties undergraduate students in universities in former European colonies experience. Therefore, to preserve the ongoing existence of indigenous cultures and societies, indigenous people must challenge colonial policies, organizations, structures, and beliefs, among other things (Corntassel, 2012). As stated by Schoole and Nkomo (2007), decolonisation theory promotes and assists in developing specific rural communities where learning institutions are established.

Additionally, in a decolonized environment, the curriculum of any institution should be focused on providing solutions to the institution's host community where it will be utilized (Dani & Shah, 2016). In other words, decolonizing a particular curriculum helps provide answers to the problems facing the host community. Decolonizing the curriculum is a vital component of the development of art and design education or education in locations where universities are situated.

Decolonial feminist research methodologies have been developed for those who work with intersecting marginal identities as a result of the feminist shift in research methodologies and the patriarchal erasure of women in traditional decolonial/postcolonial research. Decolonial feminist research aims to address the blind spots and erasures to be more inclusive. In contrast, some Western feminist research may ignore the epistemic violence within coloniality, and some traditional decolonial theory may lack gender sensitivity. For instance, it combines the intersecting struggles of racialization, capitalism, and gender oppression, theorizing the coloniality of gender to address the gaps in existing decolonial theory. In contrast, some decolonial theorists may overlook how coloniality impacts gender identities.

## **4 Results**

### **4.1 Drawing curricula or drawing as a canon**

Art education today faces some significant problems. Sophie Perryer wrote in 2004 that two of the main issues are attempts to reform art institutions and the lack of support from democracy in South Africa for art education (Perryer, 2004, p. 83). However, she believes that decolonisation is one way to improve the situation. Before making a difference, it is necessary to understand what needs to change. Examining the curriculum and the beliefs underlying it will provide that understanding.

Sari Middernacht wrote a paper in 2016 that discusses how individuals involved in art - artists, teachers, and researchers - are exploring new approaches to art education in the global south. The paper is titled "Kinshasa: Decolonising Arts Education II, Framing the Imagined and Performing the Real." According to the article, a significant challenge is questioning the colonial and postcolonial models for art and knowledge. It is also crucial to establish connections between local and pan-African art institutions. These are vital considerations when discussing the future of art education (Middernacht, 2016, p. 1).

Middernacht suggests that we need to consider how to decolonize art education, which involves critically examining ideas and systems rooted in colonialism and imperialism. It also means making room for new voices and perspectives, not just European ones. Middernacht expresses enthusiasm for increased collaboration among different African regions, believing that working together may lead to better art education grounded in local cultures and values.

It is an intriguing topic. Art and education influence how people perceive the world. Decolonizing them could empower new generations in the global south. Middernacht presents some pathways forward, and her ideas could ignite conversations about promoting inclusivity and reflecting diverse experiences in art education.

Middernacht (2016) states that individuals involved in art - artists, teachers, and researchers - are exploring new approaches to art education in the global south. The paper is titled "Kinshasa: Decolonising Arts Education II, Framing the Imagined and Performing the Real." According to the article, a significant challenge is questioning the colonial and postcolonial models for art and knowledge. It is also crucial to establish connections between local and pan-African art institutions. These are vital considerations when discussing the future of art education (Middernacht, 2016, p. 1). Middernacht (2016) states that we need to consider how to decolonize art education, which involves critically examining ideas and systems rooted in colonialism and imperialism. It also means making room for new voices and perspectives, not just European ones. Working together may help create better art education grounded in local cultures and values.

### **4.2 Indigenous Knowledge**

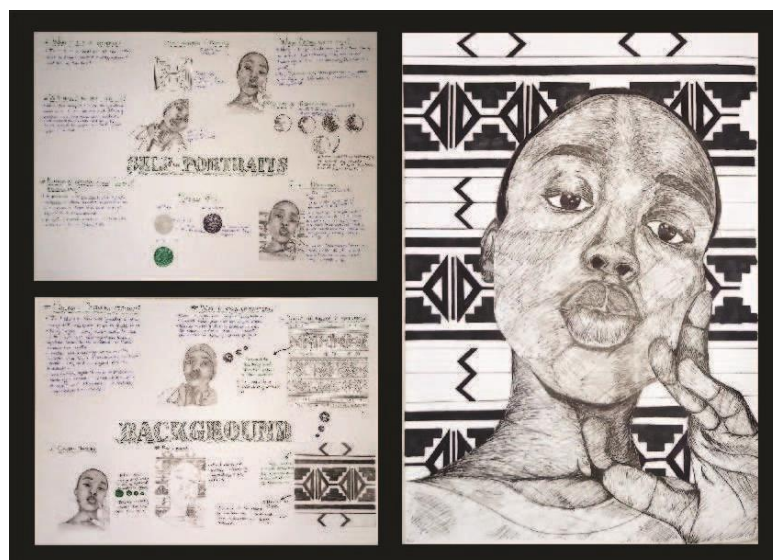
As a feminist researcher, our research focuses on the participants' lives, both internal and external, and their connection to the world (Smelik & Lykke, 2008). Life is intertwined with racialized, gendered, and

sexualized systems. When creating knowledge and meaning, feminist research methodologies prioritize embodied knowledge and pay careful attention to epistemology, positionality, and power (Ackerly & True, 2008). Feminist research methodologies challenge the idea that academia is the sole source of knowledge production and caution against how this perpetuates discourses of an inferior "other" (Lai, 2018, p1). This requires a conscientious reconfiguration of the power dynamics inherent in the researcher's positionality (subject/object). Ellen and Harris discussed eleven distinct characteristics of indigenous knowledge. First, it is deeply rooted in a specific place, and those who possess this knowledge reside there and learn from their experiences there. Therefore, if this knowledge is taken elsewhere, it may not be as easily understood. Additionally, indigenous knowledge is transmitted through oral traditions, with individuals sharing and demonstrating it to one another rather than writing it down. Documenting indigenous knowledge in writing preserves it over time and enables more people to learn it, but it changes the original method of sharing.

## 5 Discussion

### 5.1 Case study 1. Self Portrait Project

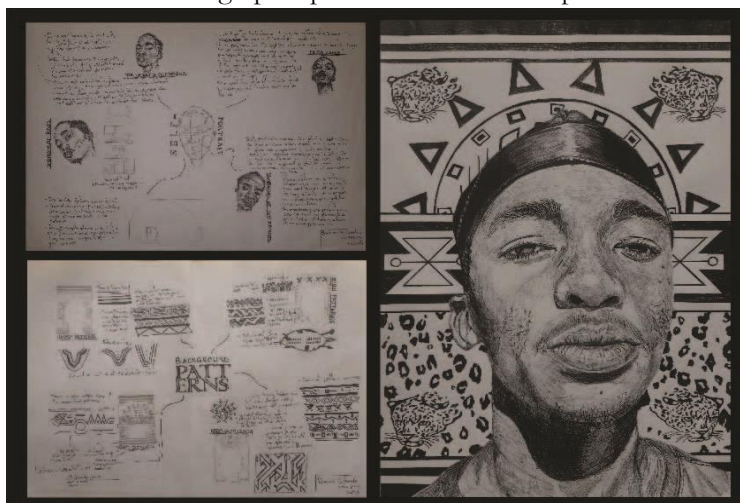
Students were asked to create a self-portrait and include background images that they identify with. Typically, this is presented Eurocentric, and students tend to draw on images influenced by Western popular culture. Initially, when the students presented their ideas on paper, they all conformed to the preset mould from the West. Therefore, we modified the instructions and instructed the students to draw on imagery, shapes, patterns, folklore, notions, and ideas from their indigenous traditions. Initially, the students did not understand what was meant, so we had to show them examples. One male student commented that he was discouraged from including traditional imagery in his drawing projects during his schooling. Students were asked to create a self-portrait in the foreground with a background filled with cultural, traditional, or rural community patterns. The shapes and forms used by the students had to be drawn from their indigenous knowledge systems. They were required to conduct research and discuss the topic with their parents, grandparents, or other family members. The medium was limited to black ballpoint pen on layout paper



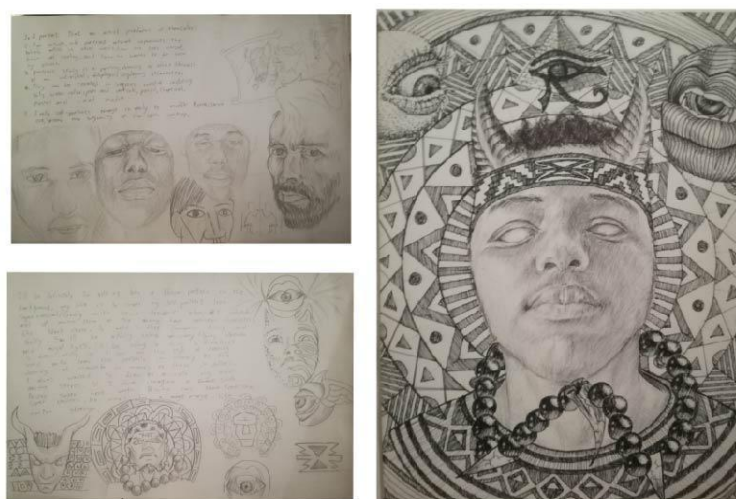
**Figure 1:** *Student A Ndebele background motifs*

In figure 1, student A used shapes from the Ndebele culture as background motifs. These specific shapes are part of a larger group of patterns, and the student chose this isolated selection because it reminded her of a clothing item her mother wore when she was younger.

Student B incorporated forms and shapes from Xhosa, Zulu, and Afrofuturism, as shown in Figure 2. The triangles, horizontal lines, and squares are inspired by Xhosa culture and are commonly found in traditional clothing. The leopard spots, known as "Ingwe," are derived from Zulu culture and are typically found on a vest worn by males. The horizontal graphic placed in the centre represents an Afrofuturist pattern.



**Figure 2:** Student B forms from Xhosa culture



**Figure 3:** Student C imagery form from Xhosa culture

Figure 3 represents Student C, who incorporated imagery from the Xhosa culture. Student C aimed to depict the significance of traditional spirituality in their upbringing. The prominent effigy of the goat's horns is a part of traditional African religious ceremonies. Additionally, they included the Egyptian "Ankh" symbol and two stylized eyes in the top section of their drawing.

For some students, the first attempt was cumbersome, and they did not feel comfortable drawing on their own indigenous knowledge systems. They felt that drawing their specific cultural imagery was never encouraged in their school drawing classes. Once the students got over this, they became fully immersed and engaged in the project. Conversations about cultures and differences happen naturally, which fosters mutual respect for all cultures. Students enjoyed and shared each other's drawings more freely and learned more about their classmates. We, too, learned from the students' diverse cultures and developed a deeper understanding of the cultural depth our students possessed.

## 5.2 Case Study 2 Figure Drawing Project

This project required students to study and draw the human figure. Historically, the students would draw a white female or male. This Westernized practice raised specific questions in the drawing classes amongst the students: Who has been seen, and who is seeing? The students challenged the power play around the white female figure being seen with value in a time where South African black and coloured figures were treated as less. Students started raising essential questions about why we draw white females in specific poses. Compared to black and coloured figures.



**Figure 4:** *Figure drawing mixed media*

In this figure (Figure 4) depiction, the students explored the idea of smudging and using paint instead of our traditional charcoal on newsprint techniques. They used a mixture of wet and dry media. In the example below (Figure 5), the student wanted to depict the same colour in the background and the mid-ground by exploring tints and tone.



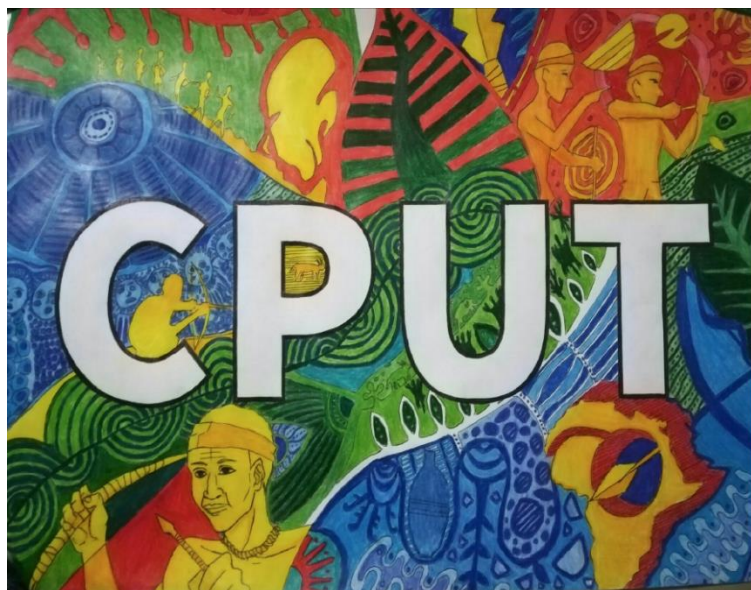
**Figure 5:** *Figure drawing tones and tints*

The project was adjusted by finding a person of colour to serve as a model. Initially, the students were hesitant about drawing the figure in the nude. The topic of cultural practices surrounding the depiction of

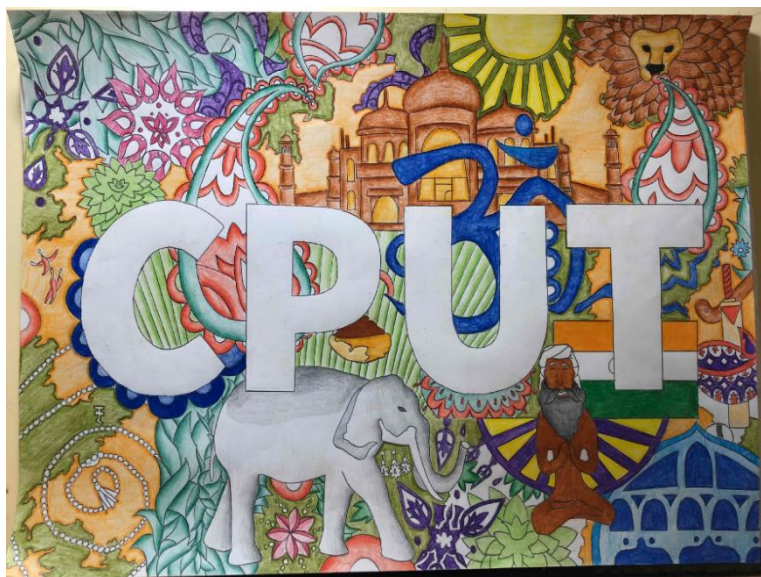
nudity in South Africa was discussed. Afterwards, the students were instructed to draw the figure using a medium of their choice, one in which they felt comfortable and could effectively represent the form. The previous drawings were small, tentative, and needed more confidence in capturing the figure's essence. However, this project encouraged boldness, vibrant colours, and larger-scale compositions on the canvas. The students enthusiastically embraced the task of drawing the figure without holding back. The resulting artwork showcases a sense of pride and confidence absent in their previous figure drawing projects. The opportunity to draw a figure they could relate to made all the difference.

### **5.3 Case Study 3 CPUT Cultural Project**

Students were asked to introduce themselves to CPUT (Cape Peninsula University of Technology) using imagery from their culture. Students could use the CPUT logo in the design as they incorporate the cultural visuals.



**Figure 5:** *Khoisan tribes celebrating their heritage.*



**Figure 6:** *Celebration of the South African Hindu communities*

This project was chosen to be exhibited as part of the CPUT Heritage Day celebrations. This project was great fun as students could use their cultural imagery to celebrate a new community they belong to, CPUT.



## 6 Overall Discussion

This research has allowed the curriculum to incorporate indigenous knowledge systems as a teaching method for design, including drawing. Furthermore, it demonstrates our ability to prioritize indigenous knowledge systems over Western ones. However, we acknowledge that we have limited control over other subjects or the entire design curriculum. Nevertheless, we are committed to providing space for students to bring their indigenous knowledge systems into the classroom as a point of reference and resource. This approach promotes the reshaping of a decolonized education in design.

In this way, we are responding thoughtfully to the call for a decolonized education system in South Africa and actively contributing to its transformation and redesign. The call for #feesmustfall and #decolonization of higher education in South Africa has prompted us to reconsider our practices as design teachers, specifically in drawing. Through conversations, we have explored how to include and collaborate with first-year students who come from disadvantaged backgrounds and may be the first in their families to attend university for design courses. By incorporating student voices and experiences through cultural embodiment, we can draw on their cultural capital to enhance drawing as both a skill and a form of knowledge. A series of drawing projects have provided insight into how first-year graphic design students experience this subject and how their indigenous knowledge has been included or excluded. Our approach has been informed by arts-based and visual methodologies rooted in decolonized theories and feminist perspectives.

Analyzing the drawings of our first-year students, we developed a methodology based on conversations, emerging literature, and theory to reconsider our teaching methods. This re-evaluation of our practice has allowed us to redesign and adjust our teaching approach, enabling us to incorporate indigenous knowledge and personal experiences. We have redesigned sections of the curriculum over which we have control. Through this process, students have actively engaged and visibly enjoyed the content. The class atmosphere and the projects have fostered student involvement, creative exploration, and ownership. As a result, students have become more receptive to learning new drawing techniques and practices.

Overall, this research has provided an opportunity for the curriculum to incorporate indigenous knowledge systems as a teaching method for design and drawing. Additionally, it showcases our ability to draw from indigenous knowledge systems as a primary point of reference, moving away from relying solely on Western approaches. Nevertheless, we know we do not have control over other subjects or the complete design curriculum. Nonetheless, we are committed to including and creating space for students to bring their indigenous knowledge systems into the classroom as a reference and resource. By doing so, we contribute to reshaping a decolonised design education.

## 7 Conclusions

In conclusion, addressing the complexities of education requires a comprehensive approach that focuses on fostering high-quality instruction and creating inclusive learning environments. It is crucial to improve teacher training and support mechanisms so that educators have the necessary skills and resources to deliver effective instruction (Alley, 2021). Additionally, recognizing the importance of student engagement in shaping educational paradigms highlights the need to incorporate diverse perspectives and experiences into the curriculum (Alley, 2021). Critiques like Alley's prompt us to critically examine institutional motivations and regulatory frameworks such as the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), urging stakeholders to reassess their curriculum design and implementation approaches. Efforts to decolonize education further emphasize the importance of embracing linguistic and cultural diversity within educational settings, including language instruction that validates and celebrates students' cultural identities. This shift towards

inclusivity creates a more equitable learning environment and promotes critical thinking and intercultural understanding (Alley, 2021). Ultimately, the goal of education goes beyond acquiring knowledge and extends to developing essential skills and attitudes for navigating an increasingly complex world. Education plays a crucial role in shaping informed and conscientious citizens by fostering intellectual curiosity, promoting social responsibility, and empowering students to engage with diverse perspectives (Alley, 2021) critically. As educators and policymakers grapple with the challenges and opportunities in the educational landscape, we must remain vigilant in our efforts to address systemic inequities, promote inclusivity, and empower learners to become active agents of positive change in society.

## **8 Declarations**

### **8.1 Competing Interests**

No competing interests

### **8.2 Acknowledgments**

We would like to acknowledge the brave students for allowing us to show their work and for trusting us with this new project.

### **8.3 Informed Consent**

Informed consent was successfully obtained from the students, granting permission to use their artwork in the research paper. This ethical practice involved a clear and comprehensive explanation of the artwork's purpose within the paper, the intended audience, and any potential implications or benefits of its inclusion. The students provided their consent voluntarily, without any form of coercion or obligation, ensuring that their creative ownership and autonomy were duly respected. Throughout the research process, open communication was maintained, and the students' valuable contributions were appropriately acknowledged in the paper, aligning with ethical research practices.

### **8.4 Publisher's Note**

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## **How to Cite**

Hugo *et al.* (2024). Unveiling Diversity: Decolonizing and Disrupting First-Year Drawing Education. *AIJR Proceedings*, 151-161. <https://doi.org/10.21467/proceedings.168.17>

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