Decolonising Textile Tools

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Abstract

This paper reports on the process of introducing decolonial textiles pedagogy within the Textile design programme at Chelsea College of Arts, researching and testing what works in this design educational environment and measuring the success of outcomes. Decolonisation within higher education is at risk of becoming a buzzword without in reality achieving change (Crilly, 2019). However, the ongoing lived impacts of the colonial on knowledge production and more specifically textile knowledge production demands an active response within the context of textile design education.

The Decolonising Textiles Tools project explored textile making, designing, and using tools that are de-centered from euro-centric technology and thinking frameworks. Too often designers are removed from the centres of production, by starting with the 'tools'– we can re-situate our perspective on textile making and machinery.

The aim of the project, delivered across one academic year, was to enable students to critically engage with what it means to be a socially and environmentally responsible designer decolonising the way we imagine textile production. Students explored the relationship between low technologies and climate racism/justice through experimentation with low-impact design/making methods.

In questioning how cultural imperialism affects textile identities related to place, land, culture, and language, students began to evaluate strands of global textile thinking. The critical intention of the project examined whether an embodied practice could innovate and make us think post industrially about textile design, altering our understanding of the euro-centric viewpoint of contemporary textile design education. Rather than taking a 'tokenistic approach' (Israel, 2019, pg 7) to inclusivity this brief gave students a voice and choice in the tools which they worked with. Investigating the decolonisation of textile technologies through two parallel and interconnected tracks: (1) hands-on experimentation (2) theoretical study into the broader transnational topics of the project.

Key words

cultural imperialism, decolonisation, euro-centric, intangible heritage, tacit knowledge.

Claire Anderson Positionality

As a white educator talking and writing about Decolonisation it is necessary that I question whether I am in implicit in maintaining systemic structures of oppression and acknowledge the contradictory position which I am presenting. As noted above the critical intentions behind the project are to scaffold the student's creative processes, with the students' voice as a partner, to alter our understandings of the euro-centric viewpoint of contemporary textile design. As a white academic I have to ensure that I do not participate in this project through academic voyeurism and acknowledge the partiality of my perspective whilst not overly relying on colleagues 'B(A)ME staff are not responsible for addressing the challenges' (UUK, 2019, pg,17).

Raisa Kabir Positionality

As a South Asian textile practitioner and educator, who has had access to university education and was brought up and resides in the UK. I am aware of my positionality as a western researcher and artist/designer in my approaches to working with indigenous expert weavers and artisans. In making sure the knowledge exchange that occurs is not extractive, with credit and mutual respect towards weaving communities given in all aspects. I acknowledge that by working with Indigenous practices and learning knowledges from expert weavers globally in Mexico, and Bangladesh, that I am thus a conduit for sharing these practices and am a carrier for passing on ancient methods of working with cloth and loom construction. We are not owners of these knowledges, and weaving though universal, there are specific material practices that are evoked when using ancient technology, which also allow multiple ways to think and look at the world differently. To unmake and remake its image and impact in thinking through decolonisation and pedagogy regarding sustainable global design and impacts.

Introduction

At the beginning of her essay 'Tracing back to trace forwards What does it mean/take to be a Black textile designer', practitioner, designer and academic Rose Sinclair recounts the invisibility of women and people of colour within the crafting, knitting and sewing magazines, Sinclair's 'guilty pleasure', she peruses on her daily walk home (Sinclair, 2021, p,113). Textile crafting spaces are often our students first experiences of the discipline and this lack of visibility of designers and practitioners of colour continues into Higher Education and Industry. An auto ethnographical description by a Textile Design academic of colour highlights how this can be demoralising for our students of colour as they 'struggle with not really having references' which they can identify with (Low, 2019). 'Decolonisation is not a metaphor' (Tuck and Yang, 2012), however as argued by Bhambra et al this project supports the value in questioning the 'epistemological authority assigned uniquely to the Western university as the privileged site of knowledge production' (Bhambra et al, 2018, p,3), and more specifically textile design knowledge production both theoretical and practical.

Student Identities

The students who participated in the Decolonising Textile Tools project were predominately from the Graduate Diploma in Textile Design at Chelsea college of arts. The course is rooted in socially and environmentally responsible design thinking and is aimed at students who have an undergraduate degree but not necessarily in textile design. Consequently, it has an inclusive approach to design and equips our students with the skills for further postgraduate study working towards more sustainable textile futures.

The cohort was comprised of a diverse international student body with individuals coming from China, England, India, Ireland, Korea, Mexico and Thailand. 'It is sensible to assume that within our student cohort(s) we will have students representing a number of identities and that we will not be able to identify them all visually'. (Grace, 2009, p, 7). Therefore, it is essential that our curriculums are inclusive of a wide range of student identities from the language and visual aids to the materials and methods.

Notably several of our students are interested in developing research projects with the intention of preserving heritage from their own countries. As a result, we discuss complex ideas to better support the students to root their work ethically such as appropriation, co-option, intangible cultural heritages etc. Dieffenbacher argues that western fashion and textiles pedagogy facilitates the act of appropriation (Dieffenbacher, 2018). Significantly, for our students from diverse backgrounds, the project recognised skills, and technological innovations, from their own textile heritages as being design appropriate and futures thinking.

Decolonising Textile Tools

Backstrap Weaving Workshops

'Identifying loom and thread as *they/them* acknowledges them as our collaborators in making cloth. Their material reality shapes not only the weaver's approach to form, but also the weaver themselves' (Morabito, 2022).

Our enquiry began with two backstrap weaving workshops in spring 2021. Figure 1 shows students learning to weave using a rigid heddle backstrap loom designed by Raisa Kabir. Raisa Kabir's practice spans across weaving, loom technology, building communities and fostering language. The first workshops led and delivered by Kabir were introductory and not embedded within the course curriculum however gave the students an opportunity to learn an ancient weaving technology found across different regions. Through this embodied practice, students were engaging with 'weaving as an action rather than an object' (Hemmings et al, 2021), uncovering global histories of labour, heritage and belonging.

Figure 1: Rasia Kabir delivering a Backstrap Weaving Workshop to Graduate Diploma Textile Design students, Chelsea College of Arts, April 2021. Photograph Tian Khee Siong.

The success of these first two sessions were measured by whether the student's continued the approaches explored independently, and whether we were 'helping our students to begin to be the producers and not merely the recipients of knowledge' (Grace, 2009, pg.47). Examples include students who developed research projects focusing on traditional textile craft techniques from their home regions with backstrap weaving playing a central role. Figure 2 of a Graduate Diploma Textile Design student developing their backstrap weaving for a final major self-directed project.

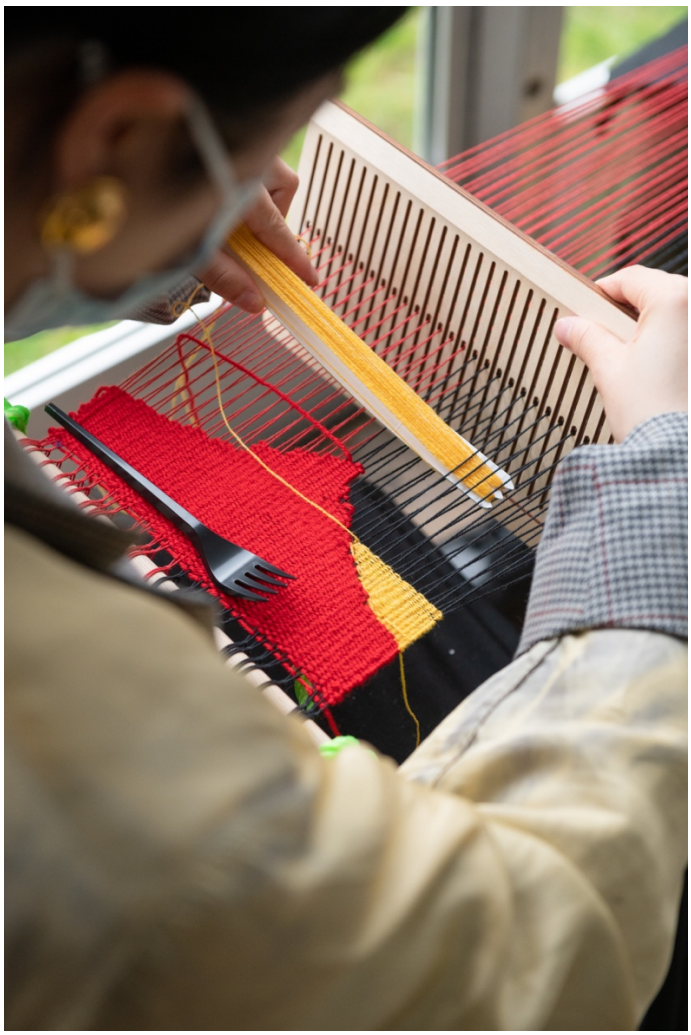

Figure 2: Graduate Diploma Textile Design student, Yifan Yang, developing their backstrap weaving for a final major self-directed project, Chelsea College of Arts, April 2021. Photograph Tian Khee Siong.

Student Project Brief

In September 2021 we began the academic year with a student project brief written by Kabir for the Graduate Diploma Textile Design students titled 'Decolonising Textile Tools'. This was one of two projects which would contribute to a 60-credit assessed Unit. To note, although the Unit is assessed holistically, the project impacted significantly on the students' learning and grade. The aim of the unit was to orientate students within the textile design subject practice, developing independent and collaborative learning and reflection. In starting the first Unit of the academic year with the Decolonising Textile Tools brief we were challenging our students to resituate their perspective on textile making and textile making tools.

The brief had been constructed to enable students to build a research portfolio using back strap looms and using the body as a tool for action, reflection and research. By placing the students as the tools, themselves (Figure 3), the students learnt how to be researchers, through their bodies, and material exploration.

Over the project students were equipped with the tools to begin to understand how to research an area of textile history, such as colour, pigment, material, technique or artist, from a global, ecological and sustainable viewpoint, through a variety of textile and weaving making processes that are off-loom and low-tech exploring the languages of design.

Therefore, this decolonising textile pedagogy acknowledges that there are several strands of global textile thinking. As textile design educators it is essential that we highlight this multiplicity to our students' ensuring more equitable textile design futures.

Figure 3: Graduate Diploma Textile Design students becoming the ‘tools’ in the weaving process, Chelsea College of Arts, April 2021. Photograph Tian Khee Siong.

Artist Research

Weekly research tasks enabled students to assess how cultural imperialism affects craft and textile identities related to place, land, culture and language. Timetabled student presentations provided a space for this as learning was shared on global textile artists, materials, techniques, and pigments.

As part of the brief, the students were given a list of global artists of colour to research, choosing one in particular to focus on reflecting on what they tell us about the world we live in today, and how so through textiles? Artist Lubaina Himid was amongst those on the list and in November 2021, whilst the students were working on their project outcomes, a large-scale exhibition of recent and selected highlights from Himid’s

influential career went on show at Tate Modern. The students were able to visit and reflect on the work and exhibition.

Carol Tulloch, writer, curator and Professor of Dress, Diaspora and Transnationalism at the University of the Arts London, had been invited to contribute an essay on Himid's work to the Tate publication accompanying the exhibition. During a Graduate Diploma Textile Design research seminar Tulloch explained to students that she see's Himid's use of colour and pattern as instilling optimism on the viewer. Tulloch concludes that she leaves Himid's work with 'the encouragement to pursue change: the right to activate your life, to live your life, to make the change we want, and to pursue our own definitions of normal' (Tulloch, 2021, pg. 67).

Encouraging students to think about their role as future textile designers' makers and producers at this time when resources and materials are dwindling, questioning how they can make positive changes to impact on the future, underpinned the ethos of the project.

Pigment and Fibre Research

In asking students to enquire around textile histories from artists to fibres and pigments diverse areas of the global industry were shared through weekly presentations. For example, the labour relations of the nineteenth century Turkey Red industry were discussed amongst the student cohort as students researched the politics of growing, cultivating and harvesting this pigment. One of the most important industries in Scotland between 1840 - 1940 Nenadic and Tuckett's study highlighted its links to the 'world outside of Britain' (Nenadic & Tuckett, 2013). Student interest became focused on the local social and environmental impact of the pigment with the hands of workers infamously tinged with red and the industrial pollution impacting on the local environment, environmental and socially responsible design approaches underpin the ethos of the course. Facilitated through the group dynamic which the project had created, the in studio practical workshops and informal sharing of theory and practice effectively promoted group learning 'belonging and being involved are important dimensions of the experience' (Fry, 2019, p.78).

Notably our students' previous experience of Textile design was varied ranging from students who had worked commercially in the woven Textile design industry and those who were learning textile processes for the first time. Therefore, the student's response to the project from a technical perspective was highly individual. The construction of the fabric realised through the body and the control of tension was challenging from different perspectives e.g. students with experience had to re-learn their relationship to the yarns and fibers with which they were working. In contrast, students new to weaving engaged openly with this creative and flexible process.

Overall, students employed their yarns in interlocking techniques and variations of yarn thickness in order to achieve pattern to control their colour proportions. Very quickly students were not only sharing the histories and theories which they were engaging with but also technical approaches to working with the loom, their bodies and their relationships to the warp and weft (Figure 4). ‘In the selection, designers need to synthesise technical information, their sensory and affective experience around textiles, and its related meanings’ (Petreca, 2016).

The project provided a ‘safe space’ (Jalili, 2017) for students to reflect on their own positionality in the context of colonialism, making reference to how differences in social position and power shape identities and access in society ‘influenc(ing) how they participate in the classroom’ (Acevedo et al., 2015) This was evident in a number of students who were able to make further connections with their own histories and complicity in the areas of structural impact of labour and colonialism and textile histories.

Figure 4: Graduate Diploma Textile Design students experimenting with technical approaches to working with the loom, Chelsea College of Arts, October 2021.

Building Future Student Agency

The student project brief was submitted for assessment in December 2021. The framework and student engagement, with excellent student attainment, had evidenced the project's potential to be developed across the textile design programme. Consequently, the project was awarded UAL Equity, Diversity and Inclusivity (EDI) Funding for a series of workshops to be developed as a further exploration of different tools, skills, and making processes, enabling students to better understand the building blocks of core making, looking at global and indigenous textile innovations to better design textile futures.

Khadi London

The funding allowed external practitioners and studios to deliver practical and/ or theoretical workshops. In recent years amongst textile design student cohorts there has been an increased interest in understanding how to develop new yarns spinning these from raw materials rooted in both traditional and future textile design approaches e.g. Bio-yarn development (Kapsali, 2016).

In response to this interest, with the students' voice as a partner, we invited spinners from Khadi London to deliver charkha (spinning wheel) workshops to our postgraduate textile design students from MA Textile Design and the Graduate Diploma in Textile Design courses.

Figures 5 & 6 Show students participating in a Charkha Spinning workshop delivered by Khadi London at Chelsea College of Arts, May 2022.

The sessions enabled students to engage with spinning fibre, and similar to backstrap weaving, using their own bodies to direct their experiments, controlling tension and speed. The 'khadi' woven cloth has become synonymous with Mohandas Ghandi (Trivedi, 2007), however, has a history which pre-dates the twentieth century. The Decolonising Textile Tools project acknowledges our student's intersectionality and religion and it's connectivity to race 'two or more cultural identities are difficult to be treated as separate constructs' (Chan, 2018, pg.61). However, the practical workshops focused on the spinning of the traditional cloth rather than its transformation into a religious symbol. Instead, the workshops presented an opportunity to learn a traditional hand spinning technology helping to alter our understandings of the euro-centric viewpoint of contemporary textile design.

Figure 5: Postgraduate Textile Design students participating in a Charkha Spinning workshop delivered by Khadi London, Chelsea College of Arts, May 2022. Photograph Claire Anderson.

Figure 6: Postgraduate Textile Design students participating in a Charkha Spinning workshop delivered by Khadi London, Chelsea College of Arts, May 2022. Photograph Claire Anderson.

Conclusion

Measuring success

Students engaged well with the project with excellent attendance throughout, feedback highlighted that the practical workshops had contributed to a sense of more inclusive community building in the studios. Notably, the workshops were delivered within studio space rather than in the technical workshops which positively impacted on issues associated with access to space, pressures on technical teams in the summer term and accommodating increasing student numbers.

The embodied practice and tacit learning approach of the project (and workshops) could potentially help to address attainment gaps often encountered in units with written components. In 'scaffold(ing) critical engagement' (UAL, 2021) we are helping the students to build confidence in reading, analysing and interpreting their sources.

However, overall students were not making connections between the Decolonising Textile Tools techniques and practices as being futures thinking, instead identifying contemporary technologies such as 3d printing as leading to innovation.

Despite that, the accessibility of the tools and design approaches e.g., backstrap looms and charkha spinning wheels are easily transported, were quickly identified by the students who developed some of the techniques within their final independent design projects.

Figures 7 Shows repurposed waste dog hair from the pet grooming salon which Graduate Diploma Textile Design student Weiyi Chen hand spun on the charkha to create a collection of accessories which dogs and humans can wear together. The work represents and questions the ethics of the symbiotic relationship between 'owner' and pet.

Often textile design students on leaving University must re-learn the tools which they are working with as the equipment within technical workshops are too expensive for them to self-fund. These workshops helped equip students with a range of additional making and design approaches which are accessible post University.

Broadening the scope of making and material research in this way allowed an alternative intuitive curriculum that orientated itself with embodied labour first as a design tool. Considering making and material manipulation first, it let us critically make links within textile history, indigenous technologies, and design processes, and to reflect on the ecological impact of 300 years of industrial production. Tools to wield the future of textile processes, necessitates a decolonising of euro centric design models that emphasise production. Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, a Bolivian feminist scholar, says in her essays in *Ch'ixinakax Utxiwa: On Decolonising Practices and Discourses (2010)* That only by listening to and revering to the ancient weavers of South America, that we can remake the world in the ways in needs to heal. Decolonising may not always be possible, but equipping our students with a full curriculum that allows them to navigate the hierarchies between western design

knowledge as preferential, allows a fuller consideration of the global practices and histories of materials, colours, fibres and making knowledges that have been borrowed upon for centuries.

Figure 7: Repurposed waste dog hair from the pet grooming salon being spun on the Charkha Spinning wheel, Chelsea College of Arts, June 2022.
Photograph Weiyi Chen.

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