

# NATURE- CONNECTED DESIGN PEDAGOGY

## ~~A REFLECTIVE CASE STUDY~~

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### **Abstract**

This report examines a reflective case study of a nature-connected design pedagogy workshop for academic staff from the Branding and Design Innovation (BDI) programme, School of Design, London College of Communication (LCC) in summer 2023. The workshop, held at the Lumen community space in central London, focussed on supporting staff to incorporate nature-connected approaches into courses. The report outlines the workshop structure, resources, facilitation, and insights gained. The discussion highlights how pre-existing conceptualisations and experiences of nature shaped responses and further indicated the relevance of situated place-based sensitivities to context. Overall, the report provides a concise case study of an engaged teaching approach supporting staff to integrate nature-connected design pedagogies into course design and student learning.

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# Table of Contents

|                                                         |           |
|---------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| <b>Abstract</b>                                         | <b>1</b>  |
| <b>Introduction</b>                                     | <b>4</b>  |
| <b>Nature-Connected Design Curricula Workshop</b>       | <b>5</b>  |
| <b>Workshop Resources</b>                               | <b>6</b>  |
| <b>Workshop Structure</b>                               | <b>9</b>  |
| Morning: Exploring in teams                             | 9         |
| Midday: Sharing our explorations                        | 10        |
| Afternoon: Grounding and Integrating into Course Design | 11        |
| Participant Feedback                                    | 12        |
| Facilitator Reflection                                  | 12        |
| <b>Discussion</b>                                       | <b>13</b> |
| <b>References</b>                                       | <b>16</b> |

# Table of Figures

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |   |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---|
| Figure 1 – Lumen United Reform Church Courtyard.                                                                                                                                                                       | 4 |
| Figure 2 - Map shared with groups to identify potential green spaces within easy walking distance of Lumen.                                                                                                            | 5 |
| Figure 3 - Interconnected species map: Draw connections between species in the park and mark their different routes.                                                                                                   | 6 |
| Figure 4 - Species guide map: Draw a map of a place from the perspective of a particular species and what it needs to flourish. This activity was adapted from the species booklet and the interconnected species map. | 7 |
| Figure 5 - Active listening exercise: Notate and draw different noises and sounds you can hear.                                                                                                                        | 8 |
| Figure 6 - Interspecies conversations: Write down a conversation between different species.                                                                                                                            | 8 |
| Figure 7 - Species masks: Make a mask and imagine a familiar place from the perspective of another species.                                                                                                            | 9 |



# Introduction

UAL's Climate Action Plan commits to transforming curricula and teaching practices to achieve climate, racial and social justice (UAL, 2022). A recent internal review of course handbooks at UAL highlighted opportunities for integrating more ecological perspectives into curricula suggesting an ongoing need for nature-connected pedagogies. As per the Climate Action Plan, these practices should help build critical thinking and capacity on environmental issues and justice (UAL, 2022).

To help address these gaps, as the Design School at London College of Communication is currently undergoing course re-approvals, we (the authors), developed an experimental nature-connection workshop (Martin et al., 2020) for academic staff within the Branding and Design Innovation (BDI) programme's staff away day in June 2023. We structured the workshop around self-directed exploration of nearby parks and gardens in teams with the intention of creating a space for slowing down and reconnecting with the urban grey-green environment and with each other (Lin et al., 2023). We further sought to support attentiveness to place by encouraging alternative ways of seeing, noticing, and experiencing nature and green space as sites for design inquiry, through experimentation with existing collaborative creative methods developed through research (Jickling et al., 2018).



Figure 1 – Lumen United Reform Church Courtyard.

# The Workshop

The one-day workshop was held at Lumen, a multi-faith worship and community space on Russell Square, London. The flexible space we used had an outdoor courtyard allowing us to work both inside and outside as the weather permitted (Figure 1). The Lumen space is within walking distance of several green spaces that our teams could explore (Figure 2).

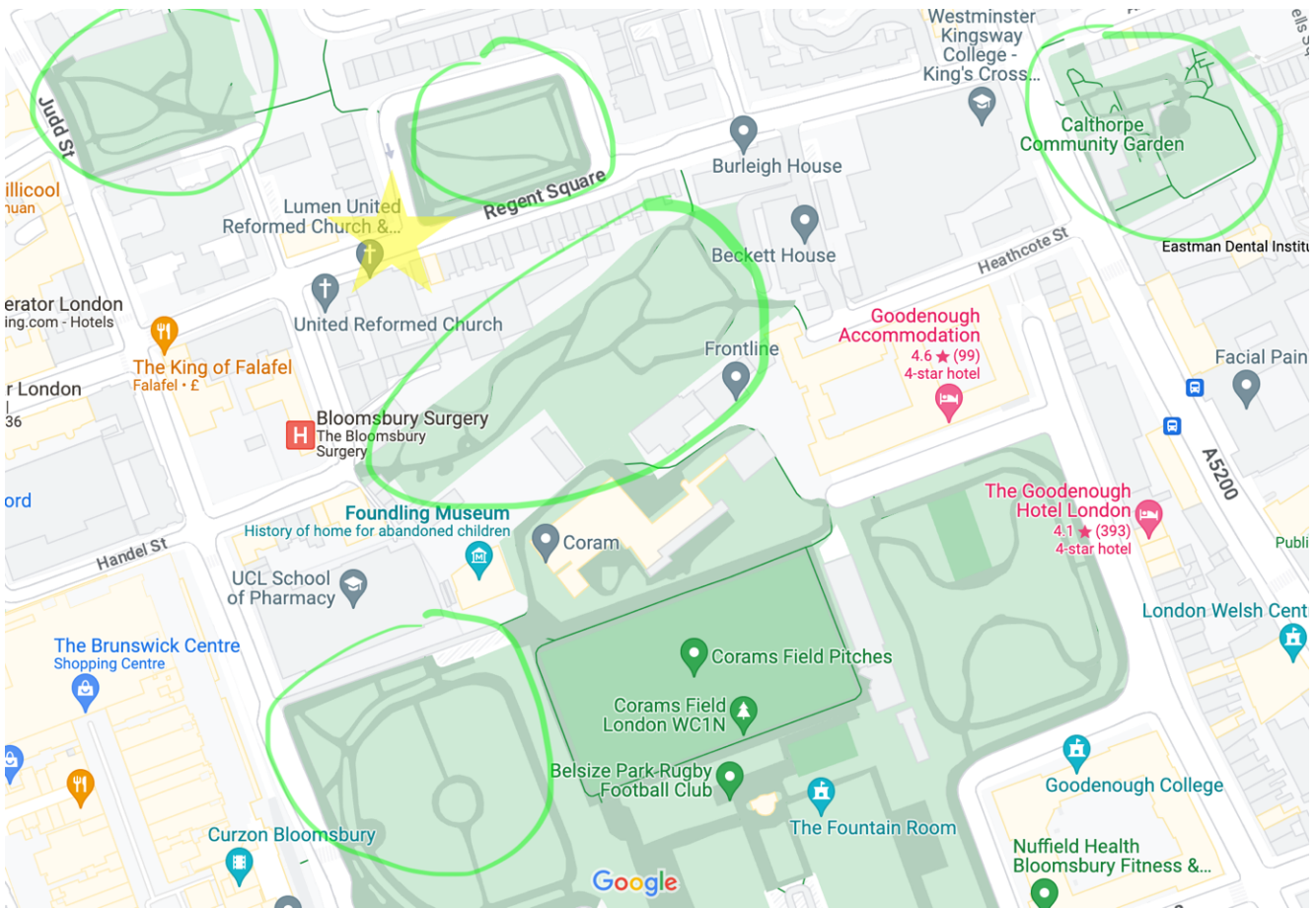


Figure 2 - Map shared with groups to identify potential green spaces within easy walking distance of Lumen.

Aligning with UAL's Climate Action Plan for capacity building and environmental awareness (UAL, 2022), our focus was to encourage academic staff (senior lecturers, lecturers and associate lecturers) across different undergraduate and postgraduate courses within the BDI programme<sup>1</sup>, to reflect on and develop their course designs. The workshop drew on our previous design-led research into creative, sensory methods for reimagining human-nature relationships within urban environments through the More-than-Human Data in the Smart City

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<sup>1</sup> (Courses include: BA Design for Art Direction, BA Graphic Branding and Identity, BA Design Management, BA Design for Branded Spaces, MA Design for Art Direction, MA Graphic Branding and Identity, MA Design Management, MA Design for Social Innovation and Sustainable Futures)

'MoTH-Cities' project (<https://mothcities.uk> Heitlinger et al., 2022). We sought to provide experiential learning opportunities to actively explore nearby urban nature using adapted tools from the 'MoTH-Cities' project to nurture alternative understandings of 'data' and the city from other species' perspectives.

The workshop began by introducing the aims for the day, each other, and our resources. This was then followed by teams exploring green spaces using a set of design resources and activities. In the afternoon, participants came together to share and reflect on their experiences from the morning. Groups discussed and presented back key insights, themes, and potential approaches that had emerged through their engagements with urban green spaces and nature. This fed into further discussion on opportunities for nature-centred design across courses by interrogating the morning's experiences and how these could be developed into more discipline-specific studio pedagogy.

## Workshop Resources

We adapted resources from MoTH-Cities project (<https://mothcities.uk/resources>). These are playful and adaptable resources suitable for outdoor use and easily produced using a A4/A3 printer.

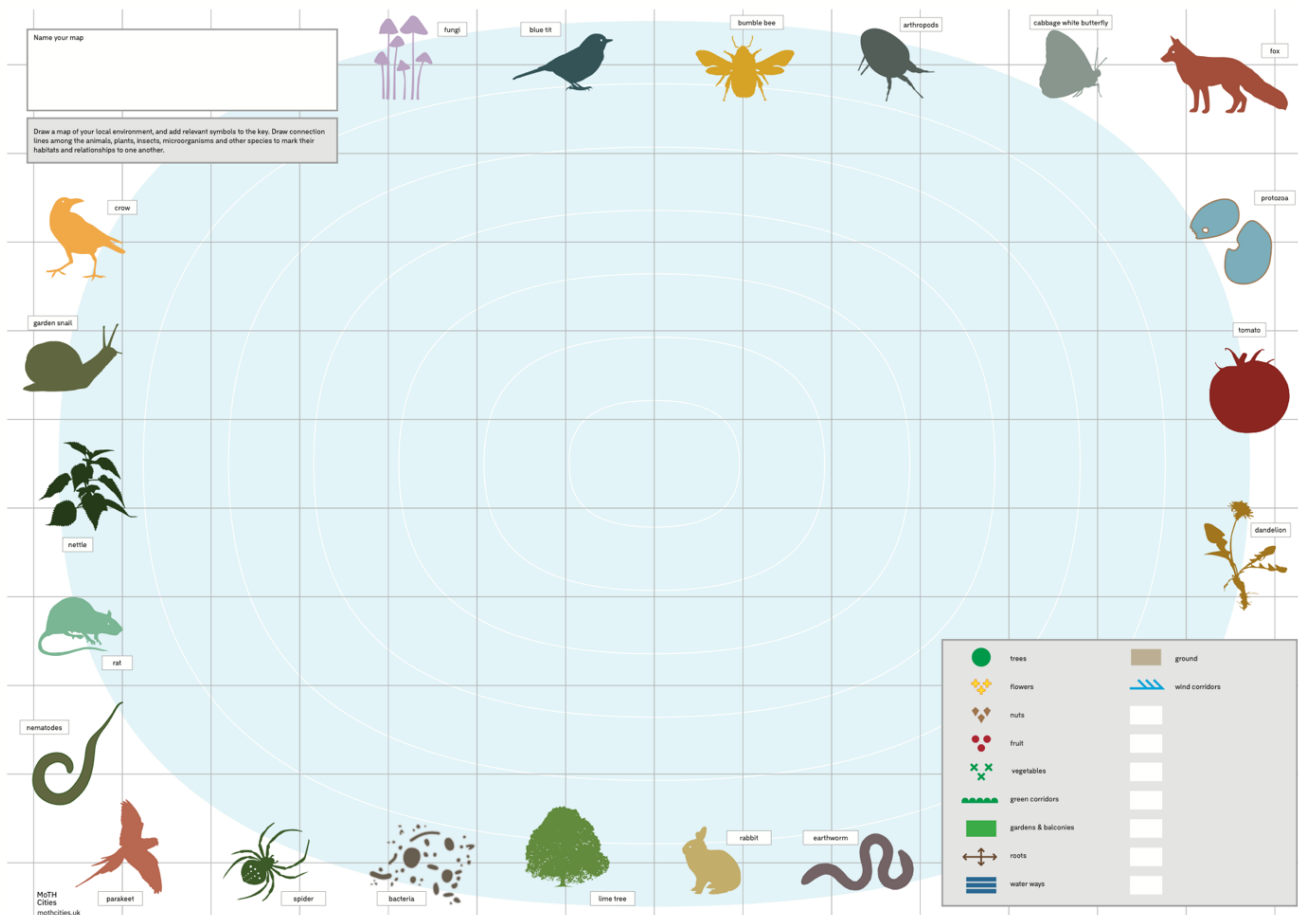


Figure 3 - Interconnected species map: Draw connections between species in the park and mark their different routes.

For each of the teams we provided a tote bag containing:

- Interconnected species guide map (Figures 3 & 4)
- Active listening exercises and interspecies conversations activity. (Figures 5 & 6)
- Species mask – a unique AI-Generated paper mask. (Figure 7)
- Mini stretch canvases and an A8 piece of card covered in double sided tape to create natural and found object artwork.
- Sample bags for collecting inspiring materials.
- Luggage tags for writing reflective notes.

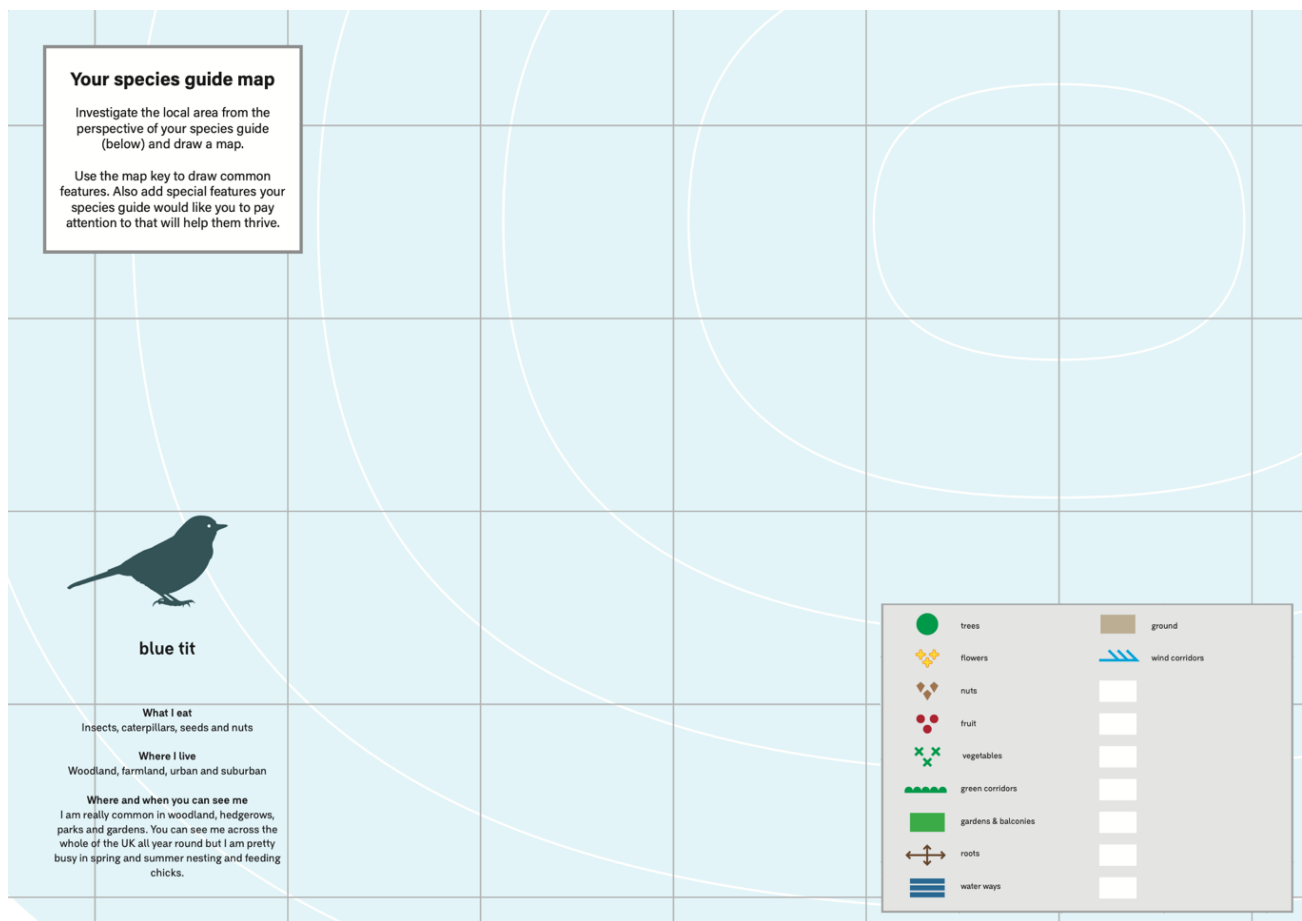


Figure 4 - Species guide map: Draw a map of a place from the perspective of a particular species and what it needs to flourish. This activity was adapted from the species booklet and the interconnected species map.



Listen to the human and non-human sounds around you and create a score based on the different sounds you can hear.

Feel free to annotate the score however you like.

What do these things communicate?

Example:

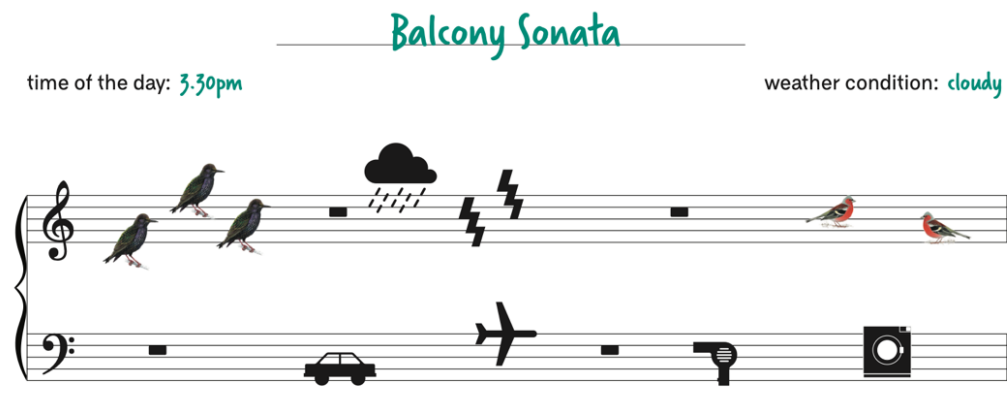


Figure 5 - Active listening exercise: Notate and draw different noises and sounds you can hear.

**Start a conversation between these two members of your local ecosystem.**

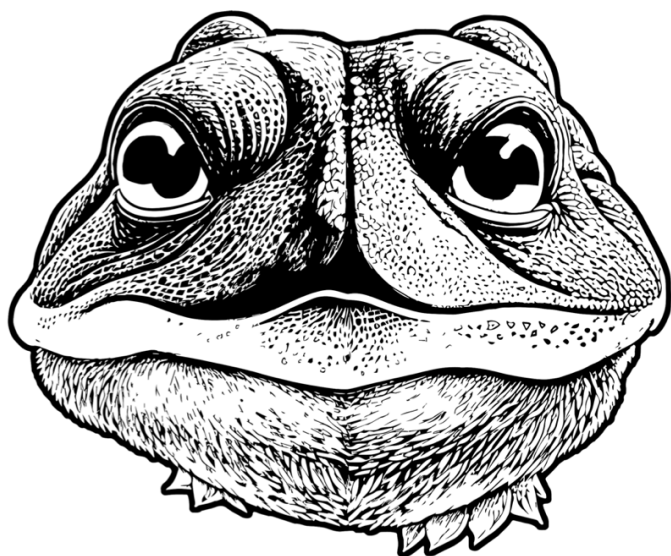
**Spread some gossip from one species to another.**

Figure 6 - Interspecies conversations: Write down a conversation between different species.



## Where do you go to...? Common Toad Bufo Bufo

- |                 |                   |                  |                 |
|-----------------|-------------------|------------------|-----------------|
| → a) Find food  | → d) Keep lookout | → j) Raise young | → g) Escape     |
| → b) Find water | → e) Meet enemies | → k) Recover     | → h) Have sex   |
| → c) Sleep      | → f) Hide         | → l) Die         | → i) Give birth |



1. Cut out the animals face, eye holes and holes for string.
2. Thread string through holes.
3. Keep it close as you explore.
4. Map the world as your animal.
5. Use the questions to help.

Print 1 of 1 (AP) Design, concept and layout: <http://keir.xyz> Questions adapted from: <https://mothcities.uk/activity-book>

Figure 7 - Species masks: Make a mask and imagine a familiar place from the perspective of another species.

## Workshop Structure

### Morning: Exploring in teams

We began the day by forming teams of people and introduced each resource in the bag, highlighting the guidance provided that could help scaffold their activities. We asked the teams to use the resources to explore aspects of the hidden, micro, and macro sensory urban environment. These instructions were deliberately open, leaving space for each team to collectively adapt and apply the resources. We asked each team to familiarise themselves with their resources and use the maps of the local area (Figure 2) to choose a nearby green space to explore and embark on self-directed walks.

Three of the four teams went to St George's Garden and graveyard, and one to Calthorpe Community Garden (Figure 2). During the 1.5 hour exploratory session we as facilitators checked in during each teams'

walk and used this as an opportunity to note themes, ideas, and other experiences we could draw on in facilitating our reflection in the second half of the workshop. We used a WhatsApp group chat to locate each team while they were walking and to coordinate our return to Lumen for lunch.

Prior to lunch we asked people to return to the Lumen and informally present and share their findings. While we initially suggested we do this outside, the wind got the better of us, blowing paper and materials all over, so we opted for showing work indoors on group tables. Each group displayed what they had done and were asked to wander around each of the tables to look at each groups' work (Figure 8).



Figure 8 - Group tables showing responses to activities.

## Midday: Sharing our explorations

Presenting the work in this way highlighted how collectively and individually, the groups had approached the same activities differently, sparking conversations about what they had seen, heard, or felt was missing within the environment. Following the informal observations at each table, we asked each group to tell us how they had approached the activities, what the activities had helped them see, hear or feel or notice and what they felt they expected to notice, but was absent (Figure 8).

- **Team 1:** Having engaged in an active listening exercise, the team shared their observations on animal hierarchies in the park. They noted the use of the sites structures as platforms for bird displays. Interestingly, they also remarked on the absence of certain smells, which might have been more pronounced had it rained, emphasizing how weather can alter our interactions with urban green spaces.
- **Team 2:** The teams active listening exercise primarily captured snippets of human conversations about nature, as they found it challenging to hear beyond these dialogues in the park. Their observations led to a discussion on the human tendency to categorise some species as pests, like rats, while romanticising others whilst ignoring the inherent cruelties of nature. This sparked a counterpoint from

another group, emphasising the need to view humans and other creatures as interconnected entities, drawing inspiration from indigenous perspectives.

- **Team 3:** This team focused on the interplay between natural and human-made objects in the parks by creating collages of discarded objects and re-labelling them as new species. This playful blurring of the boundaries between human and nature, prompted a reflection on the predominantly western lens through which we often view nature and the power of naming. This observation underscored the importance of incorporating more indigenous ways of understanding and experiencing the environment holistically.
- **Team 4:** Captivated by the powerful scents in the Calthorpe Community Garden, this team adapted the active listening exercise to document a "smell-scape." They also engaged in an interspecies conversation activity (Figure 3), imagining dialogues between the construction cranes towering above the sight and the local crows. Additionally, they found a commemorative mosaic in the garden, which they perceived as a reservoir of feminist energy, capturing their interpretations through abstract drawings.

## Afternoon: Grounding and Integrating into Course Design

After lunch and our informal sharing of each teams' discovery detailed above, we moved outside into the courtyard and gathered our focus by doing a guided meditation to bring us back into the present moment before introducing the next activity. Once we had prepared ourselves and the space we asked that participants rearrange themselves into course-specific teams, spanning both undergraduate and postgraduate programs.

The task was to adapt and integrate their morning experiences into a student-oriented session. The scope was flexible, allowing teams to design for specific year groups or segments of the academic year. Teams were asked to present their ideas for teaching activities to the rest of the group as if we were students being asked to do specific types of activity. After each team had presented their work, we facilitated a discussion across the whole group. The following are some of the course specific proposals presented by the teams:

### Course-Specific Proposals

1. **Mapping Urban Ecologies:** This approach aimed to shift both educators and students from a predominantly human-centric view to a more encompassing ecological perspective. Utilising a multi-sensory toolkit, the goal was to foster a slower, more communal engagement with students and nature.
2. **Eco-Conscious Inductions for BA and MA Courses:** Designed to diminish ego-centric perspectives, this proposal focused on tracing the life cycles of everyday

products and services. Through weekly challenges, students would document activities and gather materials, delving into the natural resources behind common objects. Facilitated discussions would introduce semiotics, visual languages, and speculative scenarios, promoting values of rewilding and regeneration over wasteful consumption.

3. **Sensory Zine Creation:** This unit would harness active listening techniques, engaging all the senses and tapping into embodied knowledge. The product, a zine, would encapsulate diverse sensory experiences. Incorporating non-violent communication methods, this approach would emphasise the importance of listening to nature and other species.
4. **Critical Exploration of Green Spaces:** Visiting historically significant gardens, such as Kew Gardens, with colonial legacies would spark discussions about the commodification of nature for Western interests, often at the expense of marginalised communities. Conversations could extend to students' personal connections with plant species from their homelands, exploring varied cultural interpretations and uses.
5. **Nature-Infused Branding:** This proposal centred on deriving brand elements for different species based on observations, urging brands to align more closely with ecological concerns rather than mere consumption. It would also encourage students to develop personal typologies for categorising and understanding nature and use the language and tools of marketing and branding to advocate for nature.

## Staff Feedback

Informal feedback from staff was positive highlighting they appreciated the opportunity to venture outdoors and work on ideas for new sessions. The day's structure and preparation were also commended for striking a balance between collective and individual exploration of familiar urban green spaces. The resources provided were seen as beneficial, offering an adaptable framework for the workshop and their teaching, as they enabled participants to focus on often overlooked aspects of the urban landscape as a learning space.

## Facilitator Reflection

### Structure

Our facilitation approach was designed to be supportive and responsive, providing space for staff interests and approaches to emerge through self-directed investigation. As a facilitation team it was key to ensure we made time to speak with both individuals and groups during the activities we ran, while maintaining a collective learning journey through check-ins and reminders via WhatsApp. This enabled fluid and dynamic discussion based on group insights and the flexible facilitation approach can hold space for serendipitous discoveries and depth of exploration and we adapted the schedule based on groups' emerging insights and interests.

Delivering the session using a flexible approach highlighted the importance of openness in the design of the resources and the facilitating of the workshop. Each individual and course team interpreted the resources in a way that made sense to them in the contexts they are working. This meant that some rejected using some of the resources and preferred to appropriate blank sheets of paper, cardboard and labels or change some of the resources in how they were originally intended to be used. This highlighted how foregrounding lived, embodied practices can reveal existing skills, experiences, and talents to build on rather than prescribing 'new' skills.

## Resources

The resources were originally designed to engage a range of non-experts on rethinking what 'data' could mean in the context of more-than-human design, but as we found different individuals had diverse interests or challenges with the theme. The resources worked well for sensitising the group to reflect more holistically on the natural environment, yet at the same time, the resources prescribed a particular way of understanding and presenting nature that some experienced as too Western in its orientation with tools such as mapping.

Where there was less engagement in the resources was through the two activities that focused only on singular species. This included the species guide map and the mask activity, the latter of which was not introduced until the afternoon. On reflection these resources may require more specific guidance and extra time. When previously we have used more specific species perspectives to explore urban spaces, we have either allocated people a specific species or asked them to choose and then create a mask of their own with additional time to reflect on some of the key ideas that can help bring a particular species to life.

## Discussion

This reflective case study highlights the complexity of positioning nature within design pedagogy. Our observations revealed a multitude of ways groups interpreted nature. Examples we observed include perceiving nature as a brand, nature as critical object, nature as a conversation, nature as texture, nature as transformation, nature as commodity, nature as respite, nature as restoration, nature as sensory experience, nature as dialogue.

Depending on where and how activities are brought into the curriculum, it seems important to consider where students and we, as tutors and facilitators, are coming from as a starting point. We all come to nature with our own personal his/herstories, experiences, perspectives, expectations and assumptions about what constitutes the natural world and our relationships with nature, whether at microscopic, species, landscape or planetary scales. It is also important to highlight how nature is as much a cultural construct to avoid taken for granted perceptions of 'naturalness' (Haraway, 2003). Environmental and cultural research has long argued that concepts that maintain dualisms that separate humans from other species underpins and maintains environmental harms.

Particularly for inductions, and as part of early group interactions, it could be valuable from a pedagogical perspective, to understand and unpack some of these ideas within teaching teams and students, while also recognising some of the wider benefits and challenges of nature-centred designing and learning.

## Research

The workshop insights resonate with broader research on human-nature relations. Studies show engaging with and connecting to nature fosters eco-friendly behaviours, while nature's restorative qualities impact learning and wellbeing (Dewey, 1998; Kuo, Barnes & Jordan, 2019; Martin et al., 2020; Segal et al., 2020). Pedagogical research also calls for holistic eco-justice in higher education that shifts from anthropocentric to ecological concerns while supporting more contemplative and slower attentive forms of engaging (Jickling et al., 2018; Lin et al., 2023). However, studies at UAL reveal London's urban setting can engender anxiety and disconnection from nature among students and staff (Barker, 2023). This highlights the need to further incorporate place-based approaches attuned to urban contexts alongside an understanding of student and staff experience and nature-focused pedagogies (Butler & Sinclair, 2020; Sobel, 2004).

UAL's Climate Action Plan (UAL 2022) commits to transforming curricula and teaching for climate justice, through building critical thinking and capacity on environmental issues (UAL 2022 p.4). This workshop aimed to support these goals by facilitating experiential learning to nurture more-than-human perspectives in pedagogic design. The insights gained in this case-study underscore the value of inclusive, interdisciplinary approaches that bridge urban and natural contexts in design education. Sustained efforts to integrate diverse understandings of human-nature interdependence into learning and teaching will be vital to realising the plan's vision.

Research by Clarke et al. (2019) and Blythe et al. (2016) offer complementary viewpoints to inform participatory, design-led pedagogies. Clarke et al. advocate for 'more-than-human participation', emphasising the intricate interdependencies of urban ecology. They recommend strategies such as de-centring human privilege, delving into temporalities, integrating indigenous wisdom, and employing design pedagogy to cultivate sensitivities and alliances (Clarke et al., 2019). Blythe et al., challenge 'solutionist' approaches, advocating for co-design practices that prioritise open-ended and playful engagement with participants, emphasising the significance of the design process over the final product (Blythe et al., 2016). Both papers champion pluralistic, decentralised methodologies that challenge dominant paradigms in design and research. Incorporating such diverse viewpoints is pivotal for catalysing the systemic changes envisioned in UAL's climate justice agenda.

In summary, this reflective case outlines an experimental workshop structure facilitating engaged explorations of nature-connected design pedagogy. It discusses participant insights

and highlights relevant contextual factors. The paper offers a concise case study of practice supporting efforts to integrate ecological perspectives into course development for climate justice.



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