

# Creating Space for Diverse Design Culture in First Year Studio

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## Overview

At the onset of the pilot study, the authors collected a small sample of data on current teaching and learning practices at OCAD University with a focus on 'cultural diversity' within the studio classroom. The intent was to investigate the current state of 'cultural diversity' in studio practice seen from two perspectives: faculty and students. The first part of the study asked the question "What are the current efforts on the part of faculty and what, if any, are the design-specific-pedagogical approaches they use that relate to 'cultural diversity'?" See the conference proceedings from NCBDS 2017 [[http://ncbds.la-ab.com/33\\_Proceedings.pdf](http://ncbds.la-ab.com/33_Proceedings.pdf)]. While faculty interviews uncovered predominant themes and levels of faculty engagement in relation to 'cultural diversity', the question arose as to whether or not students' expectations and experiences aligned in similar ways. Therefore, this paper seeks to address the question, "What are student experiences and expectations in context to 'cultural diversity' with respect to their studio-based learning in first-year-design education?"

## Methods

As was the case with faculty interviews, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a small sample of student participants across three of six disciplines at OCAD University: environmental design, graphic design, and industrial design. Questions were framed around six educational aspects of studio-based learning: the setting of the learning space, assignment structure, design process, peer/mentor critique, assignment outcome(s) and evaluation. Using approaches from grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, pp.3-21) interview transcripts were analyzed to identify themes found within student responses.

### Defining 'Cultural Diversity' From the Student Perspective

For the purposes of this study 'cultural diversity' was defined as follows. Students were asked to respond as to whether or not this definition resonated with their experiences and how they defined 'cultural diversity':

"Cultural diversity is a dynamic process whereby cultures change while remaining themselves, in a state of permanent openness to one another. At the individual level, this is reflected in multiple and changing cultural identities, which are not easily reducible to definite categories and which represent opportunities for dialogue." (Matsuura, 2009, Foreword iii)

Faculty interviewees generally rejected the definition because it did not get at contextual nuances necessary to make 'cultural diversity' actionable (Desai, Seeschaaf Veres and Snow, 2017, p.414), students fundamentally agreed with the definition. They held beliefs that diversity is a "dynamic process whereby cultures change while remaining themselves, in a state of permanent openness to one another" (Desai, Seeschaaf Veres and Snow, 2017, p.414) and emphasized the value of shared

knowledge and “opportunities for dialogue.” (Desai, Seeschaaf Veres and Snow, 2017, p.414) Students seemed to live and embody this definition in their everyday life both on and off campus.

ED1 stated, “I agree with that [definition] to the extent that culture does always grow and change and become its own unique thing but still having an homage and respect to where you come from”

Predominant Themes: Evident/Non-Evident in the Classroom

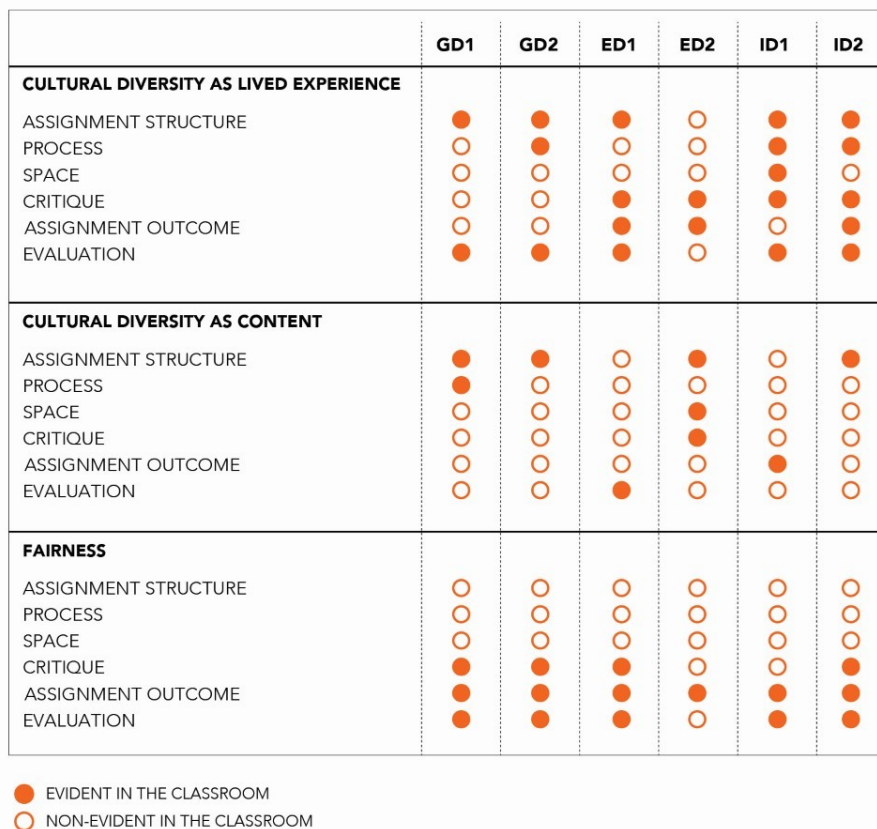


Figure 1: Predominant Themes Analysis

Figure 1 outlines the three predominant themes that emerged from the analysis of student interviews: (1) cultural diversity as lived experience, (2) cultural diversity as content, and (3) ‘fairness’. Given that the faculty study revealed that ‘cultural diversity’ was intentionally addressed at various levels of engagements in the classroom, it was imperative to understand to what extent this translated to students. Therefore, the extent to which the predominant themes manifest in the classroom can be categorized as evident or non-evident, depending on whether or not the students interviewed explicitly stated that issues of ‘cultural diversity’ were present in their curriculum or classroom experience. The following sections outline the results of the analysis with respect to each predominant theme.

### 1. Cultural Diversity as Lived Experience

Through analysis two primary framings of ‘lived experience’ emerged from the student perspective which were similar to those found in the analysis of faculty interviews in 2017: the value of student backgrounds and expertise in the studio classroom; and honouring individual learning processes (Desai,

Seeschaaf Veres and Snow, 2017), with student in vivo term being 'inclusivity'. This was most evident in the assignment structure and the evaluation components as students spoke primarily about 'lived experience' (five out of six respondents) at the site of the project as this allowed them to use contemporary and every day circumstances to inform the work they created. GD2 stated,

"People [students] do start to interact more with their background sort of the struggles or oppression they felt and try to interact with their designs or it reflects off them, and there's a lot of art talking about sort of society and how we interact with it."

GD2 went on explain that a photography course assignment had students create images using ping pong balls. Students took the opportunity in the self-directed project to work with white privilege, Black Lives Matter, etc. in order to express and/or share experiences out into the OCAD University community.

In contrast, ED1 provided an example where they felt blocked from working with their lived experience in the studio classroom. ED1 expressed feeling inhibited to bring their cultural background and knowledge into their work. ED1 stated,

"Because when we go into these classes we are shown examples and these examples are very focused in one area, Germany or Canada or America and they're very westernized. So, you're looking at those examples knowing that's what the teacher wants. And I go in talking to the teaching knowing the teacher is the client, they're the one marking, I'm trying to sell the idea to them ... I can't bring in my culture into the design because I feel like it won't sell to them."

The student perceived that experiences outside of western examples are not valued in architecture. While 'culture as content' is discussed in greater detail in the next section, what this example reveals that which is presented in the studio as precedent effects how students could be influenced to position themselves in their work based off how they think it will be valued and evaluated by the faculty.

'Lived experience' was additionally understood by the students as honouring individual learning processes through inclusive practices in the studio classroom. While students generally struggled to articulate design process, they did speak to the benefits of seeing the progression and varied approaches of their fellow students work throughout the development of a project. Students positively identified faculty's inclusive approaches towards studio components (ex. design process, evaluation, critique) as something they valued in their learning experiences. GD 1 stated,

"I think it's just a lot about understanding and being open to other people and ideas and parts of that cultures and just the way people live. And it's always good to have an integration of these different minds and things together too and being able to just kind of move together and learn from different things and kind of live in that state but still being true to yourself. That's a big part of the inclusivity of it."

GD1 did not necessarily see the benefit from what they themselves were doing directly in the studio, but how being exposed to diverse approaches from their fellow students helped to influence and benefit their approaches to the assignment.

ID1 shared a similar experience from their studio classroom, "There were a lot of opportunities for flexibility and for kind of going off the grid and or even like an unorthodox way of approaching assignments as long as it is kind of shared and openly communicated about." They felt that their faculty member not only valued diverse approaches to learning but also made sure that students could articulate back to the class that they understood and saw the value too.

## 2. Cultural Diversity as Content

As illustrated in figure 1, cultural diversity as content was recognized by four out of six student participants across the three design disciplines. According to our analysis it was articulated fewer times than 'cultural diversity' as lived experience. Students primarily identified it within the assignment structure, the component where faculty most often asked students to respond to topics connected to cultural diversity. Through lectures and assignments students were guided to respond to social matters such as gender bias in arts as expressed by ID2,

"I noticed the instructor, she definitely put a huge emphasis on female artists throughout the whole thing [...] which I thought was really interesting 'cause I had never heard that before... I'd never been exposed to that information before. I had the feeling that there were certain things that she, like as an instructor and as a person who's putting together the content, like there was things that she had to touch upon and then things that she wanted to get through."

The above quote highlights the differentiated view of the student as to what the course outline is asking as a deliverable and identifying the instructor's positionality and how they bridge this within the context of the class and content delivery.

In environmental design a faculty member is addressing diversity as content by directly integrating it into the assignment, project process, and outcome. Students are asked to go through the city prepared with knowledge and practices of universal design and identify accessibility barriers within their city. ED 2 states,

"The instructor likes to address issues of universal design. So, basically we had an assignment that had to completely change the infrastructure of a design in Toronto to follow the seven principles of the universal design."

The above-mentioned student quotes showcase how including various topics ranging from gender bias to inclusivity creates awareness as well as building greater capacity for students to think outside their individual experiences (ID2). This then goes a step further with the ED2 example in actively asking students to respond to content and via their disciplinary lens through making.

## 3. 'Fairness'

The concept of 'fairness' emerged as a predominant theme in the student interviews, particularly in the areas of assignment outcome, critique, and evaluation. It should be noted that students consistently used the term 'fair' to describe issues of equity, where "equity is viewed and understood in terms of one's relations and interactions with others, particularly where disconnects in opportunity, identity, and privilege occur." (Morton and Fasching-Varner, 2014) Issues of 'fairness' primarily emerged in situations related to financial burden, social dynamics in the classroom, performance and evaluation.

Students across the disciplines expressed concerns about the cost of materials. However, it was primarily the environmental design and industrial design students that strongly felt the success of their final projects were heavily dependent on if they used expensive materials and costly technologies such as the 3D printer or laser cutter. ID2 stated,

"I found that sometimes people's projects, like the quality of their projects were significantly enhanced because they clearly have, you know, more resources than other kids which is unfortunate. I mean I suppose that's kind of, I don't know if that's unavoidable or not but, you know, you could put restrictions on how much kids are allowed to spend but there's always ways around that."

In the following quote, ED2's statement not only demonstrates a cognizance of financial disparity between students, but it also reveals a concern for equity with regards to socio-economic status.

"I'm really lucky that I have a job and I can afford this stuff 'cause I know not a lot of people can and they have to, what's the word, accommodate for that in different ways. So, sometimes their outcome might be different from mine and that's just completely based on like what class basically. So, I think in that way it's not very fair."

Students also expressed a strong consideration for 'fairness' as it pertains to how socio-cultural dynamics (language, cultural lens, peer-to-peer relationships) are played out in the classroom environment. Firstly, this included questioning the evaluation of work produced by peers struggling with language. ED1 stated,

"My English is fine but I saw an Asian girl who her English was very, was not the best, and she was struggling to explain her message. Her designs were gorgeous but she couldn't explain them and give them that extra depth. And I felt like the teacher kind of shrugged her off because she couldn't understand her and she kind of downplayed her design. And I don't know how she got in her grade but I felt like that - if I was in her situation, I would be very frustrated"

Secondly, students clearly understood the value of diverse knowledge in order to incite a potentially less biased critique. In the following quote, ED1 expressed concern in an instance where a student project rooted in non-western culture and thinking in combination with the faculty's limited knowledge of said culture resulted in a less productive and/or thorough critique.

"And the teachers point them out but it's still and that method of oh, okay I like what you did here, but to me I personally feel like they don't have enough like knowledge of all these backgrounds to give a fair critique."

Thirdly, students emphasized the positive benefits of diverse peer engagement and collaboration. GD1 specifically describes the limited and less inspiring space produced in a faculty dominated classroom environment and recognizes that positive space is determined by the composition and contributions of their peer group.

"Like the better experiences that I've had is just - it really depended on the group that you were in within the class as well and people were all very committed and like very engaged into the projects they were doing." (GD1)

Finally, students across the disciplines expressed concern for 'fairness' in relation to overall evaluation. The study revealed that students appreciate the evaluation of a project at each stage versus only at the final outcome or presentation. Evaluation of a project at each phase was regarded as more 'fair' since it accounted for a student's incremental progress, more clearly demonstrated the development of a student's skill and idea, and de-emphasized the decisiveness of the final outcome. GD2 stated,

"I think it is really reassuring 'cause even if your final does fail because of whatever reason, you're still guaranteed to get a decent mark because you did all the work beforehand. You didn't just come up with it the night before."

Peer evaluation was also highly favoured. Students perceived peer evaluation as means of recognizing the efforts of their classmates and identifying instances where group members were not contributing. ID1 stated,

**"And thankfully we did have the peer evaluation 'cause there was instances where some people thought oh, I can just kind of coast by and not put as much effort in and hope that this end group**

**mark will kind of sufficiently add to my mark. But yeah we had the peer evaluation. We were able to explain in a different, kind of like a rating sense for lots of different aspects like effort or collaboration or even like creative collaboration.”**

'Culture as lived experience' and 'culture as content' were themes that also emerged in the faculty interviews, the concept of 'fairness' was uniquely a priority for the students. The authors speculate that this priority exists due to a traditional understanding of evaluation or 'high marks' as current and future success. In addition to this there may be an association between difference and barriers to success (language, economic status, etc.), where the students identify a strong need to create a 'level playing field' for themselves as much as for their fellow classmates.

## Limitations

Given the nature of a pilot study, it is expected that a number of limitations would arise, however two are of priority and will be addressed as the study is revised and expanded. Firstly, the research participants in the student-focused study could not be confirmed as having taken courses with the faculty that participated in the faculty-focused study. Secondly, because the size of the participant group was small and spread across three disciplines, the outcomes cannot be entirely representative of the majority of the students at the beginning design level.

## Summary

The analysis of student interviews provided three predominant themes with several key points raised within each:

Cultural Diversity as Lived Experience: From the student perspective, the value of diverse student backgrounds was most beneficial when shared openly and transparently in the studio classroom; students could be themselves while at the same time be open to new ways of thinking and doing when responding to an assignment. What became apparent is that what faculty brought in or didn't bring in to the studio classroom (approaches to making, precedent examples) affected what students made because of how they thought it will be valued and evaluated by the faculty.

Cultural Diversity as Content: Diversity and inclusivity was used as content for studio pedagogy in lecture and/or assignments that ranged from topics of gender bias to inclusivity. This created an awareness and understanding of issues of inclusivity and diversity in students previously unfamiliar with such areas. The diversity themes were situated in a specific disciplinary context, from art history to environmental design, and was delivered to students via assignment topics. This provided the students with the opportunity to actively translate this acquired knowledge to their design responses and outcomes.

**'Fairness':** Unique to the student interviews was the concept of equity as it relates financial burden, socio- economic status, social dynamics in the classroom, performance and evaluation. Expressed as 'fairness' by the students, equity was strongly represented in the responses related to assignment outcome, critique and evaluation and focused on valuing diverse knowledge; peer evaluation and engagement; and de-emphasis of the final outcome in recognition of the project development process. A traditional understanding of evaluation-based success and a proclivity for a 'level playing field' amongst classmates, whether in relation to financial disparity and/or barriers to success, were identified by the authors as potential drivers for a focus on 'fairness' in the student responses.

**“I think overall there is a lot of diversity and inclusivity in the classroom structures right now at OCAD University. But I think there can always be a little bit more leniency and flexibility for the ways that people approach projects and assignments and even just class discussions. Because there are a lot of ways that people do things and people approach things and whether that be on a cultural spectrum or even something else like mental health, I think there's a lot of flexibility that can be kind of integrated more but I think it's going on a more positive path towards that.” (ID1)**

## Conclusion

The NCBDS 2018 conference theme on leveraging the past posed whether it was the aim to provide space for the activation of student's lived experiences and diverse backgrounds within studio discourse, or to reset a student's perspective by creating a common 'clean slate' for all students to begin from? Based on the findings from the student-focused pilot study, the authors propose an identified need to shift from a binary framing of 'one or the other' to that of a hybrid space that honours the complex realities, skills, and needs of a contemporary beginning design student.

The next steps for this research study will include an expansion of the sample size for both faculty and student components; collection and analysis of student work and refinement of the study questions. Ultimately, the authors will propose a comprehensive tool kit for studio instructors to use in constructing a beginning design pedagogy that offers multiple pathways to inviting 'cultural diversity' into the classroom.

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