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### DESIGNED FUTURES

Design educators interrogating the future of design knowledge, research and education.

#### Nomads and Narratives: Navigating personal and professional literacies in design education

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#### Abstract

*South African students in higher education face many challenges other than the requirements of the academic programme. This places additional demands on academic staff tasked with delivering specialised content in support of student success rates. In response, we have introduced a subject intended to support first-year design students in navigating studio and theory subjects in a trans-disciplinary way. This subject covers academic, personal and professional literacies. Personal and professional literacies are the subject of this investigation, in which we question how we can support students in preparation for fast-changing future environments? Designers are becoming “nomads, storytellers, peddlers, do-gooders and Swiss army knives” in response to the fast-paced context of the third millennium (Vrontikis 2013). In this paper, we reference these trends, as well as the well-documented skills and attributes required to navigate digitally mediated globalised contexts. Literature indicates that there are skills and cognitive processes that fall outside the boundaries of our academic curriculum. We, therefore, ask how these personal and professional literacies could be supported using a coaching approach, and how could these literacies be assessed? We present an autoethnographic account of learning interventions within the subject of academic and professional literacy, with a specific focus on a coaching approach to developing personal and professional literacies. This narrative method enables a critical reflection and interpretation of personal experience in which we interrogate notions of identity and value. Knowledge itself does not drive habits or change; what matters for students is not necessarily knowing the theory, but an ability to live it, to do it, and to do so consistently enough in a way that integrates with their existing selves. We propose the development of student agency assessed on the strength of engagement rather than outcomes.*

**Keywords:** Academic literacies, twenty-first-century skills, coaching

#### Introduction

South African students in higher education face many challenges other than the requirements of the academic programme. This places additional demands on academic staff tasked with

delivering specialised content in support of student success rates. In response, we have introduced a subject that is taught across all our design programmes in the first year. The subject covers four broad literacies, personal, information, academic and professional, and is intended to support first-year students in navigating studio and theory subjects in a trans-disciplinary way. Information and academic literacy are currently outsourced to the library and the academic writing centre respectively, while personal and professional literacy is the subject of this paper.

Coaching has gained popularity in supporting individuals to navigate the complex demands of fast-paced private and professional contexts successfully. Digitally mediated work environments require skills and cognitive processes that fall outside the boundaries of our traditional design academic curricula, yet the field of coaching responds to some of these skills and processes. Therefore, we ask how these personal and professional literacies could be supported using a coaching approach, and how could these literacies be assessed?

## Theoretical approach

Nomadic theory offers a lens with which to view the ever-changing context of the postdigital age. With its roots in the philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari, nomadic theory is underpinned by a monistic view, which opposes a dualistic understanding of nature-culture in favour of the self-organising force of all matter (Braidotti 2011). Nomadic theory provides a non-hierarchical and non-dialectic vision of difference or otherness, this is in opposition to the Eurocentric humanist vision of 'man' ('masculine, white, heterosexual, property-owning, urbanised') as the knowing subject at the exclusion of all 'others' ('women or sexual minorities, natives and non-Europeans and earth or animal others') (Braidotti 2010).

Nomadism acknowledges that identity takes place in the interstitial spaces between nature and technology, male and female, black and white, local and global, past and present, necessitating mobility of thought that is non-linear and driven by process rather than concept or outcomes. The cartographic method is central to nomadic thought and supports an affirmative ethical position that relies on accountability, situatedness and cartographic accuracy. Tracing back to Spinoza, this ethical position is not based on vulnerability or lack but rather on assets and empowerment gained through understanding. Nomadic thought considers the "effects of truth and power that actions are likely to have upon others, including external and non-human forces" (Braidotti 2011). The emphasis lies not with the individual (I) but with relations between individuals (we) and not in the dualistic mode of self and 'other' but as part of a mutual specification and co-dependence.

## Literature

We have referenced academic literature in the field of design education, eLearning and integral coaching regarding twenty-first-century skills. In design education, Vrontikis (2013) identifies trends and skills for designers in response to the fast-paced context of the third millennium. She identifies that designers will need to be 'peddlers' with well-honed entrepreneurial skills and the ability to control all aspects of the design process from concept, to funding to prototyping and marketing; 'designers as do-gooders', gaining recognition through participation in community initiatives rather than accolades from design competitions; 'designers as Swiss army knives' able to toggle between digital platforms and various media; 'designers as storytellers' in a world where information is so easily accessible, stories and narratives gain importance; and 'designers as nomads' with agility to adapt to economic, and environmental shifts. Students often attend more than one school not necessarily finishing courses but taking the skills they need from different programmes.

Similarly, once in the workplace, designers embrace career mobility, taking what they need and then moving on, staff in creative industries rarely staying longer than three years.

In the field of eLearning, Cormier (2008) considers that students learn in technologically mediated networks that are open and constantly growing, this has been referred to as rhizomatic learning. In this example, 'the curriculum is the community' (Cormier 2008), and learning takes place in multiple ways, not only between people but also between people and their hyper-connected devices in a "limitless symbiotic relationship between human and machine" (Wheeler 2012). "In learning 3.0, anyone can learn from anybody anywhere" (Cronje 2016) and the lecturer's role changes to that of facilitator. This educational shift translates from a traditionally constructivist view to a digitally mediated one in which the boundaries between the natural and the cultural are blurred.

Hedberg and Stevenson (2014) advocate viewing technology as the mediator of learning, thereby keeping the curriculum flexible and constantly evolving. Lecturers and students can explore new ways of accessing and generating content and having to select suitable media to empower users to take ownership and engage meaningfully in the interactions (Quinton & Allen 2014). Skills such as organising, analysing, evaluating and applying information, communicating and collaborating with others in real-time, as well as generating and sharing content are learned while engaging with projects online (Anderson & Krathwohl 2001; Hedberg & Stevenson 2014; Quinton & Allen 2014).

Learners create and curate their own 'personal learning environments' as (hi)stories of their own learning. A personal learning environment will be different for each learner, will consist of their own amalgamation of software and hardware, and will "account for the countless variables which distinguish us from one another and make each of us truly unique and experience specific learning needs" (Lian & Pineda 2014). These tools can be classified into three pedagogical levels: "personal information management, social interaction and collaboration, and information aggregation and management" (Dabbagh & Kitsantas 2012).

In a world of information overload, students accessing limitless information online can feel overwhelmed, Bhaskar (2016) notes that students given a choice of six elective essay topics did better than students given a choice of thirty. Curation is indicated as a core digital competency for critical inquiry, aggregation and storytelling in digital culture based on principles of selection, arrangement, simplification, explanation and display of information (Bhaskar 2016).

The notion of the lecturer as facilitator and enabler of learning resonates with coaching methods. The field of integral coaching has rapidly grown over the past 30 years. Based on Wilber's (1997) Integral theory, coaching is now widely accepted and applied as an enabler of personal and professional life-long learning. There is a precedent for coaching approaches in educational contexts, and Griffiths (2005) presents a review of literature in the field, making a strong case for coaching methods to be used to support learning. Esbjörn-Hargens (2009) proposes a framework based on integral theory for transdisciplinary application in the complex context of the twenty-first century. Integral theory applies to the fields of psychotherapy and psychology, education, mixed methods research, ecology and sustainability, international development, future studies, business, and organisational management.

The role of the coach in a one on one integral coaching context, is to facilitate the client's long-term performance, the capacity for self-correction and the ability to self-generate. In other words, facilitating the ability to modify behaviour consistently at the moment and to be able to anticipate what might be needed next (Flaherty 2010). Against the background of Wilber's AQAL quadrants, the coach explores the client's current lived in narrative and how this narrative facilitates meaning in and of the world (Wilber 1997). The coach helps to identify new narratives to support relevant new ways of languaging, feeling and behaving (Sieler 2003).

The purpose is for the client to bring their ‘whole self’ into awareness, the ‘I’ as distinct from but also deeply connected to and shaped by the ‘we’ (Keagan 1982).

In the business context, the coaching relationship can be described as triangulated or axial, in that the needs, outcomes and behavioural shifts are identified and negotiated between the parties of client, HR/operational/strategic leadership/business needs and the coach (Kahn 2011). The coach creates a safe space, as listener and questioner, holding the mirror of self-awareness so that clients can achieve greater, more spacious sense of ‘what is’ true for themselves.

As a summary, the themes emerging from the literature were tabulated and mapped against the coaching approaches that could be suitable. This table was used as a conceptual framework to initiate the reflection and discussion in the following sections of this paper.

**Table 1: Skills and requirements for designers**

Author	Trend/keyword	Skill/attribute/cognitive process	Coaching approach
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Vrontikis 2013</li> <li>– Hedberg and Stevenson 2014</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Design peddlers</li> <li>– Concept</li> <li>– Crowdfund funding</li> <li>– Prototyping and Marketing</li> <li>– Real-time collaboration</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Entrepreneurship</li> <li>– Numeracy</li> <li>– Multidisciplinary awareness</li> <li>– Ideation</li> <li>– Visual and verbal communication</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Teamwork</li> <li>– Communication</li> <li>– Conflict management</li> <li>– Time management</li> <li>– Goal setting</li> <li>– Gaining support</li> <li>– Strategic thinking</li> <li>– Focusing</li> <li>– Agility</li> <li>– Design thinking</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Vrontikis 2013</li> <li>– James et al 2002</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Do-gooders</li> <li>– Peer recognition</li> <li>– Community work</li> <li>– Mentoring</li> <li>– Pro-bono work</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Communication</li> <li>– Literacy</li> <li>– Negotiation</li> <li>– Collaborative skills</li> <li>– Conflict management and resolution</li> <li>– Acceptance of intellectual criticism</li> <li>– Capacity to compromise</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Teamwork</li> <li>– Communication</li> <li>– Speech acts</li> <li>– Social intelligence</li> <li>– Difficult conversations</li> <li>– Conversational mastery</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Vrontikis 2013</li> <li>– Hedberg and Stevenson 2014</li> <li>– Quinton and Allen 2014</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Swiss army knives</li> <li>– ‘Media ambidexterity’ integrate technology in a non-linear way</li> <li>– Organise online activities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Multimedia literacy</li> <li>– Digital literacy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Ease with systems and technology</li> <li>– Curiosity</li> <li>– Taking risks</li> <li>– Self-trust</li> <li>– Flexibility</li> <li>– Agility</li> <li>– Problem-solving</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Vrontikis 2013</li> <li>– Quinton and Allen 2014</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Storytellers</li> <li>– Engaging</li> <li>– Interactive</li> <li>– Narrative</li> <li>– Generate, publish and share content and resources</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Storytelling</li> <li>– Visualising</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Narrative thinking</li> <li>– Storytelling</li> <li>– Summarising</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Vrontikis 2013</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Nomads</li> <li>– Adaptable to economic and environmental shifts</li> <li>– Students often attend three schools, not necessarily finishing courses but taking the skills they need from different programmes</li> <li>– Career mobility</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Agility</li> <li>– Mobility of thought</li> <li>– Curating</li> <li>– Life – long learning</li> <li>– Professionalism</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Motivation</li> <li>– Gaining support</li> <li>– Relationship building</li> <li>– Self- regulation</li> <li>– Self-awareness</li> <li>– Resilience</li> <li>– Ease with risk and failure</li> <li>– Giving and receiving feedback</li> <li>– Difficult conversations</li> <li>– Social intelligence</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Quinton and Allen 2014</li> <li>– Cronje 2016</li> <li>– James et al 2002</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Curation</li> <li>– Organise information virtually</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Remembering</li> <li>– Organising</li> <li>– Mapping</li> <li>– Analytical skill</li> <li>– Task analysis</li> <li>– Critical interpretation</li> <li>– Peer evaluation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Summarising</li> <li>– Précis</li> <li>– Effective questioning</li> <li>– Emotional intelligence</li> <li>– Giving and receiving feedback</li> </ul>

## Method

In writing this paper, we present a ‘mini autoethnography’, as a shortened version of autoethnography that sacrifices the breadth and depth of critical reflexive study for a clear and sustained focus on three salient experiences, episodes, moments, or events from one’s life. The researcher reflexively considers ways in which they have changed during the process. Reflexive or narrative ethnographies exist on a continuum ranging from biography to ethnographic memoirs to ‘confessional tales’ where the research ethnographer’s ‘backstage’ research endeavours become the focus of investigation (Ellis et al. 2011; Van Maanen 2011).

We also acknowledge that in applying autoethnography as critical social research, it is key for researchers to consider their own roles with critical reflexivity, whereby they come to view themselves as complicit in the problems they perceive. Discussing such complicity can place scholars in a vulnerable position. It is this consideration of unveiling the vulnerable self that can free the mind of self-deception without self-deprecation. In addition, it is imperative for the auto ethnographer to anticipate a complicit and vulnerable self with regards to sharing sensitive information with others as they grapple with the complications of their educational positions. The second author writes the three moments and the discussion presented in the next section of this paper.

## First moment – communication

Students were tasked with writing an email to the head of department to appeal for readmission after academic exclusion. The brief was for students to propel themselves into the future and write the email that any student would hope never to have to send and to do so in a way that made clear what had happened, who was responsible, and what would change if the student were given a new opportunity to study. This was the first written task I gave them, resulting in some 180 emails to my Gmail account. The assessment criteria were as simple as sending the email, submission as a PDF file, the coherence of the argument, the tone of the mail, the ease of identification of the student for the reader and inclusion of salutations.

This project brought the students' personal stories into the room in a way that was vulnerable making for them as individuals. In terms of adult learning, this was an attempt at working with real problems rather than fictionalised ones. I had not initially thought about further opportunities to explore the students' issues more deeply, and I found myself overwhelmed with simply reading the number and content of the emails. I decided not to pathologise the content but to try to accord the issues raised with dignity: they were only being shared with me as part of a communication task, which was intended to develop the capacity to request and establish support, practice accountability and take responsibility and to do this as written reflection, telling your story if you will. In fact, I was not clear what was fiction or truth.

From a coaching perspective, it was an exercise in foregrounding current narrative, to encourage, through reflective written language, a self-awareness of past actions, present insights, and future commitments and the linkages of consequence between them. It served to invite the whole student in his or her whole world into the academic world, with the student at the centre of his or her own story. It also asked the student to pay attention to both the tone of request and giving key aspects of information so that the reader would be more likely to take action and respond accordingly. This process foregrounds the intersection of conversational skill in terms of making a clear request as a speech act and social intelligence. Through reflection, students could explore vulnerability and express emotion. This exercise also attempted to respond to the challenge that lecturing staff expressed about student reluctance to ask for help when they encounter academic or personal difficulties and to do so timeously.

## Second moment – somatic games (group work)

This class served as an introduction to group work. We began each of these sessions with a series of non-verbal games, which might have served as icebreakers in other contexts. In a studio cleared of chairs, I asked the whole class to stand, and arrange and order themselves in various ways, such as tallest to shortest, by day and month of birth and by surname. The catch was that they could not speak. The groups could only speak to notify me when they had completed each time. This focus on non-verbal communication equalised the language differences in the room and disallowed comfortable friendships. I was able to quietly observe as the group figured out how to problem solve in an animated way. This was a complex task for the larger groups which were as many as 60 students, and much simpler for the small group. Names and birthdays as a ranking tool also highlighted how well students knew each other's personal information, and that some cultural groupings had many students with surnames starting with the same letter that was perplexing and not obvious to others. The value of the 'I' in each phase of the activity was changing all the time as new 'we's' with new structures emerged.

This somatic exercise required the students to enact the changing ranking with their bodies and use facial and hand gestures to communicate. This shifted the mood to a more open and energetic one in readiness for the second exercise that was verbal and seated. The students appeared to be relaxed with each other, already having looked closely at each other and pulled faces and made gestures.

In the second instance, I created random groups of similar sizes within each class using numbering. I asked each group through discussion to find ten things that they, as small groups, had in common. These could not be obviously anatomical, nor that were they all humans or design students. It was also intended to use playfulness to get the students to cross social boundaries with each other, in a low-risk way. The groups would be peer-assessed for generating the most interesting and unique list. The groups had fifteen minutes for discussion

and then had to self-select a spokesperson to present their lists. Without exception, the class groups were unanimous in which team they chose as most interesting.

The groups asked others to be quiet and listen as they presented. I did not police the room and maintain control. During the process, I circulated, asking the teams to widen their focus from only anatomical or design-related matters where needed or to try to make their ten things unique to their group. This was an example of student-generated content that emerged as they practised listening and questioning each other. During the communication module earlier in the year, I had given them the tool of asking questions prefaced with what, where, when, who and how (rather than asking why or leading or closed questions). These 'four whiskeys and a Heineken' are typical coaching style questions designed to help the answerer to stay calm and feel comfortable enough to open up and explore possibilities. This technique forms an important aspect of skilful listening, applicable in any kind of target or user group research in how it creates resonance and builds trust. In grouping the students randomly, their comfort zones were dislodged, resonant in a way with the 'compassionate dislodgement' that characterises coaching. I was learning that I had to take a more directive role in the physical organisation of the space and the group learning context.

### Third moment – group work

At the start of this module, I tried a different approach to figuring out what content was relevant. I asked each of the student groups to name what they regarded as problematic or to reflect on breakdowns in their experience of group work, rather than me providing research-based examples or problematising examples of breakdowns myself. As they spoke, I captured their responses live on screen while facilitating. By the fourth time I did this, I asked a student to type and record while the class generated ideas so that I could pay more attention and listen better. In this way, each group generating their own content of what was problematic and what was not, and some of these points became the basis for their reflection on the group design and ideation process at the end of this group activity. In coaching terms, their structure of interpretation as a class was explored and made visible. What they regarded as problematic was affirmed as valid, because the ideas were shared with each other and combined into one list. In this way, there was an emergent 'we', constructed in the moment and different in each group.

### Discussion

In a professional coaching relationship, purpose and outcomes would be negotiated between client and coach, or in a triangulated or axial relationship between human capital, organisational, operational or leadership requirements, the client and the coach. Based on needs identified by contracting parties in this relationship, there are potentially different outcomes and accountabilities. In this educational instance, the lecturer is trying to navigate the axial relationship between what might be anticipated professional behaviours within the context of a rapidly changing and uncertain world, academic behaviours and habits identified in the curriculum by academic staff, and the student's current goals, values, skills and habits. Much of the time the lecturer is working in short feedback loops of responsiveness. I found that each of the four classes over the week differed slightly as I reacted and adapted in response to what was engaging for the students.

Working as part of what felt like a fragmented group rather than as a team resulted in a continuous challenge to find and hold the narrative arc of the subject and in choosing what mattered to the students as content. The challenge from the professional context is to assess and update curriculum content in a continuous responsive way, while the pattern of the design

curriculum is more static and fixed. The students similarly would have expectations of what is expected of them based on their previous school experience.

An additional dynamic is that I was working with the group, rather than with separate individuals as one would in a coaching context. The students are in four discipline-specific groups: visual communication design, fashion, product design and jewellery design and manufacture. The size of these groups ranges from 10 to 65 students. The smallest group proved most challenging to engage with as a group. They were the only group in which I managed to learn all their names, and as a result, they may have felt more exposed as individuals rather than having the anonymity of disappearing into a group.

Consistent with one-on-one coaching, the physical studio environment plays a significant role in the participant's engagement, their sense of safety within the group, and willingness to trust the process. As a physical space, the studio has flexible seating arrangements, the room as it stands has hard finishes and is somewhat echoing. Initially, the lecturer allowed a student-centred approach to seating and students sat how and where they pleased. This resulted in repetitive groupings or pairings that allowed the students to stay within the comfort of known relationships rather than any dislodgement to new conversations. As the term progressed, I experimented more with seating arrangements to enable greater intimacy alternately within groups, better listening, and unexpected partnerships. I also found myself more often at the back of the room rather than at the front as this allowed me to feel more like a facilitator and less like a teacher.

Available technology and budget constraints played a role in delivery and brought about shifts that were not always wanted initially but relate strongly to Vrontikis' design trend list of peddler, Swiss army knife and nomad. All course content is uploaded to the online learner management system, but I found that when content is being co-created or if the activities were somatic if students were not present in a given class, they struggled to re-join the group and the experience could not be repeated. When I was unable to print paper documents, I began using mobile digital applications, and students own phone cameras to capture images of relevant tools for use in the group work, in so doing students had the opportunity to practice across media and devices.

## Conclusion

Reflecting on the arc of the subject, no single person holds all the knowledge or competencies taught, and there is some duplication of content. This might serve students, as they are required to make sense of multiple stories or versions, for example, of communication. Stronger team relationships between staff and shorter reflective feedback loops with those who co-teach in this subject could alleviate this expensive duplication of time. The blended learning strategy of face to face and eLearning needs a human face to co-ordinate and administrate responses, to mark amendments, resubmissions, appeals for late assessment and program linkages. The currently somewhat flimsy narrative arc of the subject could be built around a more explicit student narrative, using a single online workbook or a reflective blog, which might strengthen student agency but pose new assessment questions.

Our sense is that the group studio context can become a better space of collaborative learning but that strategies are needed to shift student expectations of their roles as knowledge co-creators with agency and not just as learners. We are curious about exploring adult learning practices as opposed to pedagogy as it could support the development of student agency and greater dignity for individuals.

If coaching aims to create a sense of safety for the client, we have tried to create this in the classroom through modelling a coach-like way of being. Nomadic ethics of understanding is

part of this approach and can be motivating to young adults. More reflection is needed to develop better relational skills for staff. The narrative approach of coaching enables a critical reflection and interpretation of personal experience in which notions of identity and value can be explored. Knowledge itself does not drive habits or change, and what matters for students is not necessarily knowing the theory, but an ability to live it, to do it, and to do so consistently enough in a way that integrates with their existing selves.

It is tremendously difficult to see the lens through which one sees the world, and in doing so, one begins to see how one contributes to one's experience of the world. The 'I' is more able to see how others differ from me, as each of them explores their 'selves'. The more I am able to see my contribution, the more I am able to influence how I experience and interact in the world and contribute to changing that experience. My awareness of my own patterns enables me to see others as similar but differently constructed and can produce mutual tolerance in diverse student groups. A stronger sense of belonging for students can be supported using a coaching approach, and this might have significance in the exploration of decolonised education.

The current physical space doesn't support a facilitated approach. The lecture room needs acoustics suitable for small and large group work, softer furnishings, permanently installed erasable writing spaces on all the walls, rather than just one whiteboard at the front of the room. Lighting needs to be easily modified to enable shifts away from screen-based tasks and back again. An investment into the teaching space would be an asset". I continue to receive emails to my dummy Gmail account".

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