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#Decolonise!

Design educators reflecting on the call for the decolonisation of education

Object Biographies as a method for Communication Design students to construct knowledge in the Design Studies classroom

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Abstract

This paper reports on the use of object biography writing as a method for Communication Design students to construct knowledge in the Design Studies classroom. Students used a guideline constructed around the stages of the birth, life and death of an object to write an object biography on a mass-manufactured object of their own choice with a focus on how the object is used by individuals to construct and express gender identity. The method, process and outcome of the project is discussed and an evaluation offered on whether object biography writing can be considered as a form of decolonised design education. It is argued that while the writing of object biographies is relevant to the objective of decolonising design education, the project as reported here can also be criticized on a number of fronts. This includes the requirements that the research be presented in the form of a research paper, that students select a mass-manufactured object and work from a real object, the origins of object biography as a methodology in social anthropology, and the selection of prescribed readings. To align the project closer to decolonising imperatives it is recommended that improvements and adjustments are made with regard to the presentation format, the requirements for the selection of the object and the list of prescribed readings.

Keywords:

Object Biography, Communication Design, epistemology, Design Studies, decolonising design education

Introduction

The University at which I lecture formed an Ad Hoc Senate Task Team on Decolonisation of Knowledge in 2015 in response to the countrywide student protests (Hendricks 2016). The task team did not undertake to develop “toolkits” or “handbooks,” instead departments, units, research centres and faculties were tasked with debating decolonisation and determining what it meant in their contexts (Hendricks 2016). It was left to academics to “do the hard work of revisiting what you teach and how students learn in our current context” with the task team noting that they were “not experts on decolonisation – we are all finding our way through practice” (Hendricks 2016).

The management of the Faculty – in which the Department in which I am appointed resides – responded in 2016 by scheduling a number of “Decolonisation conversations.” In my Department, decolonisation was placed as a permanent item on the agenda of the weekly Departmental meetings, formed part of the Department’s strategic objectives for the year and was written into performance contracts of staff members.

From the outset, it was clear that there was no consensus among colleagues in the Faculty on how decolonisation should be defined or viewed in the curriculum. This state of affairs was not unique to our Faculty. In 2016, Professor Emmanuel Mgwashu (2016) from Rhodes University reported that the definition of “decolonising the curriculum” remains a grey area. However, he emphasised that Universities had to “keep encouraging critique and problematisation of what is considered to be knowledge and the processes involved in generating it.” Similarly, Cheryl Hendricks, the head of the Ad Hoc Senate Task Team on Decolonisation called for a multiplicity of “epistemologies/plureversality.”

Brenner, Vorster and Wintjes (2016, pp. 11-12) affirm the value of other kinds of knowledge making beyond the conventional or the linear, or what Ingold (2007, p. 153) calls “thinking straight” (cited in Brenner et al 2016, p. 12). They claim that the “entangled”, “rhizomatic” nature of researching and writing object biographies differs from the manner in which knowledge is constructed by “thinking straight” and hence is relevant to the “current climate of decolonising thought and attitude.” “Thinking straight” is connected to a “western sensibility” a position that “distinguishes a distanced and rational approach to knowledge-making from one that is immersed, physical and emotional” (Brenner et al 2016, p. 12). Brenner et al (2016, p. 12) argue – in their accompanying book to the exhibition “Lifescapes; Six Object Biographies” which ran in the first quarter of 2017 at the Wits Art Museum (WAM) – that it is possible to place the object biographies in the book into a “different political paradigm of knowledge-making altogether.”

Object biographies trace the life of an object, as do biographies of people, through the stages of birth, life and death (Kopytoff 1986 in Joy 2009, p. 540). An object is produced, or “born”; it is involved in a particular set of relationships during its lifetime; it also “dies” when it is no longer involved in these relationships (Holtorf 1998). Because objects accumulate histories, over time it should be possible to reveal relationships between people and objects by unravelling object histories (Gosden and Marshall 1999, p. 169). Just as there is no single way to write a biography of a person, there are multiple approaches to writing the biography of an object.

Drawing on Kopytoff (1986, p. 67), Gosden and Marshall (1999, pp. 170-172) and Brenner et al (2016) I constructed a guideline around the stages of the birth, life and death of an object to enable third year Communication Design students to write an object biography on a mass-manufactured object of their own choice. This paper reports on the method, process and outcome of this project, which formed part of the Design Studies 3 module, and evaluates whether it can be considered as a form of decolonised design education.

Design Studies 3

The Design Studies 3 module forms part of the curriculum for the BA Design (Communication Design) qualification. This qualification was first offered in 2011 and replaced the National Diploma Graphic Design. With the introduction of the degree programme came the opportunity to rethink the curriculum; and one of these changes was the transformation of the subject History of Art and Design into Design Studies. The approach to teaching History of Art and Design was embedded in western scholarship that focused on presenting a canon of mostly western artists and designers in chronological order and focused on the development of style and aesthetics. This approach was modified, but not entirely overhauled, with a thematic approach, which now included design's relation to colonialism, imperialism, sustainability, class, race and gender. The name change to Design Studies heralded a broader, more inclusive view of design as the "conception and planning of the artificial world" (Margolin 2002, p. 227) and can in retrospect be characterised as contributing to the project of decolonising the curriculum.

Design Studies 1 and 2 was conceived as a shared module between the new BA qualifications and over time three other design specialisations joined the module. However, on third year level, Design Studies is only presented to Communication Design students. The purpose of the subject on the different year levels was conceived broadly so that it would be flexible and responsive to the needs of the students, the South African context and the research interests of the lecturers. The module was also designed to prepare students for postgraduate study as the BA articulates into an Honours degree in Design.

On third year, the purpose of the module is to enable students to demonstrate detailed knowledge of design and communication design history and theory. Design Studies 3 consists of an a and b module, each of which in turn consists of two seven-week units. I teach unit 1 Gender and Design the purpose of which is to enable students to demonstrate knowledge of and conduct independent research on design and gender. The assessment criteria require that by the end of the unit students must be able to explain how gender identities are constructed, how the unequal roles and position of women and men are reflected in language and how objects of everyday life are gendered through design. In addition, students must be able to explain the influence of Feminism on design and the role of the media in constructing gender identities. The unit was assessed by way of three tasks; a written assignment, group class presentation and a research paper. The research paper contributed three fifths to the final mark, and the assignment and presentation, which were constructed to support the writing of the research paper, contributed one fifth each. Following is a discussion on the method and process involved to enable students to complete the research paper in the form of an object biography followed by a presentation and discussion of the results achieved by students.

Object biographies as a form of knowledge-making

Students were required to write a research paper of 2000-2200 words on one historical or contemporary mass-manufactured object of their own choice by writing the biography of this object with a focus on how the object is used by individuals to construct and express gender identity. It was important that the real object, not a photograph of the object, was used to work from and that reference was made to at least three of the prescribed readings. Working with tangible objects allows an interactive experience involving all the senses, the ability to scrutinize the object from all angles and very close up, to interact with the object and to understand the scale and ergonomics of the object, all of which are crucial for an in depth-analysis. As Brenner et al (2016, p. 7) argue so eloquently: "[c]lose looking means that

in the process, one enters the life, or the lives, of the many people and thoughts that are locked into any object.”

Students were provided with the following guideline to writing an object biography that was based on the writing of Kopytoff (1986, p. 67), Gosden and Marshall (1999, p. 170-172) and Brenner et al (2016):

- Birth: Provide a photograph of the object from a variety of angles and close-ups. Provide its date and dimensions and describe the object fully. Explain where, how and by who the object was produced.
- Life: explain where the object was initially most likely sold, whom it belonged to in the past and who it belongs to now. Explain what it was used for and how, in the past and present, and explain how the object reinforces beliefs about the role, position and character of men and or women. Are there any signs of wear and tear, which provides information on its life?
- Death: explain what will happen when it reaches the end of its usefulness, for example if it breaks

The first two weeks of the unit was spent on lectures and readings around gender in relation to identity, design, language and mass media and was assessed by way of four questions based on the prescribed readings (Brouwer 1995; Kirkham 1996; Meyers 1999; Woodward 2004). In the third week students were introduced to the process of writing object biographies and provided with the opportunity to try out the guideline around the birth, life and death of an object by completing a class exercise. Students divided into groups and selected an object by drawing one from a box filled with objects that I provided. The objects included a ceramic cup and saucer, lighter, beaded necklace, multi-purpose tool, commemorative tin cup, plastic bracelet and spring clip hair curlers and were purposefully selected to represent a range of cultures and historical periods. Using their handheld devices and laptops students collected information on their object from the internet and by the end of the class all of the groups were able to give feedback on aspects of the birth, life and death of their object.

A particularly challenging part of the assignment was the requirement that the student explain how individuals use the particular object to construct and express gender identity. This required of the student to use theory from the prescribed readings to construct arguments. A session dedicated to Toulmin’s model of Argumentation (Toulmin 2003) was scheduled to enable students to complete this requirement.

The programme was then interrupted for a week as all third year students were required to participate in a Faculty-wide collaborative project. The following week students visited the “Lifescapes; Six Object Biographies” exhibition at WAM and participated in an hour and a half walkabout offered by the museum’s educational team (since 2015 WAM has been a key resource in the teaching of the Gender and Design unit). This provided students with the opportunity to engage with the exhibition and come to an understanding of the method involved in writing object biographies. Following the visit, students had to start writing up their research paper, a draft of which had to be presented the following week to class. The purpose of the class presentations was for students to test their ideas and to evaluate whether they selected an appropriate object. Some students elected to select objects that were not strictly speaking mass manufactured, but as long as objects were produced in multiples, according to an established pattern, such objects were permissible. During this week a South African Feminist artist also visited the class to show and discuss her work in an hour-long presentation.

In the meantime, students also had to work in groups on the Feminism and design class presentations that were to be presented in the final week of the term to the class in a 20-

minute digital presentation. The class was divided into eight groups each of which was assigned a topic related to feminism and design. The assessment of this presentation consisted of a peer assessment of the groups and the contribution of their team members. The peer assessments contributed 60% and my assessment 40% to the final mark for the class presentation. Students had two weeks following the last week of term to complete their object biographies.

Table 1 shows the results of the three assessments. The pass rate achieved is high for all the assessments and the class averages and amount of distinctions achieved for the group presentations and research papers show very high, and good levels of competence respectively.

Table 1 Results of the assessment

Results N=33	Research paper: Object Biography	Written assignment	Group class presentation
Pass	91%	94%	100%
Fail	9%	6%	0%
Did not complete the assessment	3%	6%	0%
Distinctions 75%>	36%	27%	70%
Average	68%	55%	76%

Most students selected appropriate objects for their research project that allowed for detailed analysis and the construction of convincing arguments regarding the biography of the object. Students were generally able to contextualise their research well and many essays made good links to gender theory and provided interesting analyses. Several papers offered an excellent description and in-depth analysis and made insightful use of gender theory to construct arguments. The majority of students demonstrated their ability to critique design products from a gender perspective. Some students experienced problems with writing clearly in academic register and referencing sources. A few essays contained irrelevant information and contradictions and did not support claims with relevant or sufficient evidence.

Table 2 shows that the objects selected by students came from a range of categories from books to sporting equipment. Nearly a third of the students selected objects that can be classified as “decorative household objects” because, although most could serve a function, they were mostly used for display purposes.

Table 2 Objects selected

Category	Description
Books	Amandla novel Collins English Dictionary
Clothing and shoes	Legit denim jeans Nike Air force 1 Sneakers Soviet M-Viper Pu Hi 1 black Sneakers

Decorative household objects	Geisha lithophane tea set German beer stein with lid German beer stein with lid Lego Star Wars Boba Fett torch and nightlight Preciosa crystal ballerina Royal Albert Old Country Rose sugar pot Saturn sewing machine Scottish thistle mould Waldershop Bavaria Germany tea set Apostle spoons
Grooming/beauty products	Combina 100 shaving tool Eight piece Ferule make-up brush set Perfume "Fantasy" Britney Spears Perfume "Catsuit for Women" by Creation Lamis
Jewelry and accessories	Busby wallet Citizen Eco Drive watch Irish Claddagh ring Jacques Lemans men's classic watch Multi-layered gold choker necklace Omega Seamaster watch Oval frame glasses Rolex Oyster wristwatch
Musical Instrument	Hawkes and Son Concert violin Mridanagam (South Indian classical instrument)
Phones and cameras	Nokia 6101 Zenit E SLR camera
Sporting equipment	Mizuno Shadow series golf club

The majority of students could date their objects to a specific year, six students could situate it within a decade and only six objects could not be dated. The oldest dated object was a violin from 1889, with the remaining objects being nearly equally spread throughout the current and previous century.

Students chose to select objects mostly produced in Euro-America. Objects originating from other countries, including China, Russia and the Czech Republic, were in the minority. The only other countries that featured to some extent was South Africa with four and Japan with three objects. In some cases, the designer could be identified by name, such as Bruce Kilgore who designed the Nike Air force 1 Sneakers, but in most instances, it was the company, such

as Lego, Elizabeth Arden and the lesser-known KMZ (Krasnogorsky Zavod), which were identified. Only a few objects were not assigned to an individual designer or company.

Students largely selected objects presently belonging to themselves or to family members. A few students elected to discuss objects they themselves had purchased; for example a pair of sneakers or jeans, but most chose an object which they received as a gift, such as perfume by a godmother or which they had inherited, for example spoons inherited from a grandmother. The case was similar when discussing objects belonging to others. The objects were either purchased, inherited or received as gifts.

With the help of online shopping and auction sites students were able to place a monetary value on their objects. However, many commented that the objects carried value beyond the fiscal. In writing about her brother's watch received as a birthday gift from a relative a student notes that he considers it as "priceless." Another quotes her father when asked what the beer stein which belongs to him is worth as stating: "it has no real monetary value but for me it represents, a romanticized view of an archetypical German outdoorsman in lederhosen living in perfect harmony with nature"

The majority of the students' decision to select objects belonging to themselves or family members meant that the research papers took on an autobiographical character. This brought aspects of the student's lived experience and family history into their research paper. A student commented of his much-adored Nike Air force 1 sneakers, which he has worn "constantly over a period of over three years", that it has "had alcoholic and carbonated drinks, as well as food among many other things spilt on them." Another student notes the signs of wear on her mother's inherited porcelain sugar pot, which was initially given to her great grandmother as a wedding gift.

The students' preference for choosing gifts are interesting when considering Gosden and Marshall's (1999, p. 173) observation that: "commodities are supposed to be alienable, so that they can be transacted without leaving any lasting relationship between giver and receiver ... gifts always maintain some link to the person or people who first made them and the people who subsequently transacted them." In choosing Christmas presents, birthday and wedding gifts and inherited objects, instead of "commodities", the students' object biographies were enriched as it enabled them to trace "the social links and obligations that such gifts map out and maintain" (Gosden & Marshall 1999, p. 173). A student writing on a watch belonging to a family member observes that:

"the object is not only interesting, due to the story it has, but because the bond between a grandfather and his grandson was so strong, that the grandson has never thought about selling the watch or giving it away for the reason that it reminds him of his grandfather and it is the only keepsake he has of his late role model."

Students became aware of the movement of objects through time and space and their crossing over national and international borders. For example, a student explains that a camera manufactured in Soviet Russia came into his father's possession when he bought it from a German teacher in Zimbabwe in 1984. Another student traces the journey of a sewing machine that belonged to her great-grandmother over 97 years from Switzerland to Australia and finally to South Africa.

In writing the object biographies some students appeared to move from an objective, rational description of the object to a more immersed and emotional position, which for Brenner et al (2016, p. 12) indicates a move away from a "western sensibility." A student notes her father's emotive response to the idea that his beer stein breaks: "it will mean the shattering of a dream, it will bring into sharp focus the unstoppable march-of-time." Nyamnjoh (2012, pp. 131-2) observes that "the real is not only what is observable or what makes cognitive sense; it is also the invisible, the emotional, the sentimental, the intuitive

and the inexplicable.” Through the writing of object biographies students demonstrated an understanding that the symbolic meaning of things is often far more important to people than its use function (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton 1981). Commenting on the use of a beer stein belonging to her father a student does not mention its use as a beer mug at all, instead stating “[b]oth its past and present use is identical a representation of a bygone era.”

The majority of the students were able to argue how the object reinforces beliefs about the role, position and character of men and or women and how it contributes to the construction of gender identity. In an analysis of a dictionary from 1984 a student points out the male bias and inequality in the ownership, staffing and division of labour of the publisher, as well as the inherent sexism contained in the definitions of “men” and “women” contained in the dictionary. A student notes how beauty ideals are conveyed through a crystal ballerina figurine which “is thin and has a small waist” and “elongated” legs. It was interesting to note that very few students felt that once the object breaks that it should be thrown away. Many students felt that objects should be repaired, restored or repurposed or be kept to be passed on to another family member or one day to their own children.

Conclusion

This paper reported on the use of object biography writing as a method for Communication Design students to construct knowledge in the Design Studies classroom. In conclusion, I reflect on whether object biography writing, as reported here, can be considered as a form of decolonised design education.

Depending on your view of what decolonisation means, the object biography research project may, or may not be criticised on a number of fronts: in its requirement for writing a research paper, selecting a mass-manufactured object, writing an object biography, working from a real object and in the selection of prescribed readings.

A research paper is a very traditional form of assessment and it could be argued that instead of presenting the object biographies in an academic written form other forms of presenting findings could have been explored; such as a poster, illustrated story or in spoken form, as was the case with the group presentations. Some may find the use of Toulmin’s model of argument inappropriate seeing in it links to the logic and rhetoric of Aristotle. In this regard, I would direct critics to “Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization” in which Bernal (1987) argues for the recovery of the African and Phoenician influence on ancient Greek philosophy. It should also be noted that Toulmin (2003, p. viii) himself argues that his “concern was with 20th century epistemologies, not informal logic.”

Others may argue that requiring students to select a mass-manufactured object contains a western bias. Such a criticism seems to play out in the selection of objects, which shows that students chose to mostly select objects from Euro-America. Such a bias can be avoided in the future by specifying that an object produced in Africa must be selected and opening the production methods from the outset to include mass-produced, but also one-offs, batch production or unique objects. In this way the potential for “a devaluation of African creativity, agency and value systems, and an internalized sense of inadequacy” can be avoided (Nyamnjoh 2012, p. 129). It is notable that the objects selected for analysis in “Lifescapes” were confined to objects from the WAM collection of African Art (Brenner et al. 2016). In 2016 students were in fact tasked with selecting objects from WAM’s collection for their research project in the Gender and Design unit. Although the object biography format was not followed, the results for the research projects in 2016 were virtually identical to 2017, with the exception of the amount of distinctions: 24% in 2016 as opposed to 36% in 2017.

Criticism can be levelled at object biography as a method “derived from social anthropology and adopted largely by European post-processual archaeologists” (Joy 2009, p. 542). The continued dominance of western epistemologies and eurocentrism at most South African universities are some of the aspects most frequently criticized by the decolonise movement (Heleta 2016; Hendricks 2016; Kessi 2016; Nyamnjoh 2012; Pillay 2013). The use of anthropology by the West to serve the colonial and imperial project has been justifiably severely criticized. Tuhiwai Smith (2008, pp. 66-67) states that anthropology is the discipline “most closely associated with the study of the Other and with the defining of primitivism” and that “anthropologists are often the academics popularly perceived by the indigenous world as the epitome of all that it is bad with academics”. However, Tuhiwai Smith (2008, p.14) notes that the “selected ideas, scholarship and literature” which she draws on “may or may not be attributed to either Western or indigenous traditions”.

It is possible to criticise the requirement that students access, document and scrutinize a physical object as reinforcing a “colonial epistemological order” in which the “sense of sight and physical evidence” assumes “centrality, dominance and dictatorship” (Nyamnjoh 2012, p. 131). It was noted that although students started with an objective, rational description of a physical object, in some cases this precipitated a move to more immersed, emphatic and emotional engagement. In selecting objects belonging to themselves or family members students’ work became autobiographical and offered some insight into their lived experience and personal histories. The result was that the project was imbued with affect and empathy. The development of such an empathic engagement can be encouraged by requiring students to select an object belonging to a close family member or friend and requiring an interview as part of the research process.

Lastly, the selection of prescribed readings on gender (Barnard 2001; Brouwer 1995; Kirkham 1996; Koplewicz 2011; McQuiston 1997, Meyers 1999, Woodward 2004) does not draw on authors from or situated in Africa. Although Mqgwashu (2016) warns that decolonising the curriculum “is far more nuanced than replacing theorists and authors” on reflection, I would criticize my choice of readings harshly and argue that the reading list must be relooked as there is much excellent writing on gender from an African context (see for example Behr & McKaiser 2013; Judge 2014; Lewis & Hames 2011; Ratele 2014; Van der Westhuizen 2005).

Despite such possible criticism, the writing of object biographies proved to be a useful, engaging and interesting method to enable students to demonstrate knowledge of and conduct independent research into gender and design and students achieved good results. The students’ object biographies demonstrated their ability to explain how objects contribute to the construction of gender identities and how objects of everyday life are gendered through design. The students’ class presentations and exercises, visit to WAM and presentation by a Feminist artist created an immersive learning experience.

The provided structure for writing an object biography meant that the focus moved from the traditional design historical preoccupation with the object, to a wider understanding of the moments of production, distribution, consumption and disposal of objects and their entanglement in the lives of people. By allowing students to self-select their objects of study a shift was made from prescribing what is considered “good design” and an emphasis on “genius” individual designers, to a focus on the meaning that objects and people acquire in their interaction with each other. The object biographies written by the students problematized what is considered appropriate knowledge and ways of generating knowledge for design education. Students were empowered with a method that they could use to approach the understanding of any designed object from any place and period.

As Brenner et al. (2016, p. 4) experienced, I also found that the boundaries between the role of lecturer and student started blurring as students followed a “self-directed path of interested action.” Brenner et al (2016, p. 4) argue that because students and lecturers

generate new knowledge together, object biographies can contribute to “the pursuit of transformative pedagogy.” Instead of knowledge transfer from a prescribed text or myself to students, the students “become active researchers and swiftly begin to make a tangible contribution to what is known about their object” (Brenner et al 2016, p. 4).

Brenner et al (2016, p.7) observe that “the value of research that develops out of ‘interested action’, based in developing agency and empathy, is arguably, perhaps obviously, productive and meaningful both inside and beyond the lecture hall.” I would therefore argue that the writing of object biographies is relevant to the “current climate of decolonising thought and attitude” as Brenner et al (2016, p. 12) claim. However, improvements and adjustments can be made to the project to align it closer to decolonising imperatives with regard to the presentation format, the requirements for the selection of the object and the list of prescribed readings.

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