14th National Design Education Conference 2017

Hosted by Tshwane University of Technology & Inscape Education Group

#Decolonise!

Design educators reflecting on the call for the decolonisation of education

Past + Present = Future? The Potential Role of Historical Visual Material and Contemporary Practice in De-Colonising Visual Communication Design Courses

Piers Carey

Durban University of Technology

Abstract

This paper suggests two possible approaches to researching and conceptualizing aspects of a de-colonized design education for Graphic Design/Visual Communication Design (VCD). Concepts from Post-colonial theory, such as Ngugi wa Thiongo's decolonization of the mind, Afrocentrism, Homi Bhabha's hybridity, and appropriation, along with aspects of Social Identity theory are drawn on as means of investigating these approaches.

The first approach suggests that knowledge of visual communication content from pre-colonial and colonial African societies (African Graphic Systems) can be employed as a means of contributing to a sense of both collective and individual identity, and either as African and/or as South African. Enabling such a sense of identity requires a greater inclusion of these indigenous visual traditions than may be common in South African VCD courses, and necessitates a re-definition of visual communication and the researching and construction of its history in this continent. In this regard examples will be introduced of visual communication traditions from the over eighty indigenous alphabetic and graphic systems identified in literature. This approach can enable South African students to broaden the definition of History of Graphic Design and contest the existing canon, which has been defined almost exclusively in Europe and America, in terms of scribal writing and typography, and for print. Recovery of these visual traditions is thus advocated as a means of validating and re-developing an independent identity.

Moving from the historical to the contemporary, a second approach discusses some separate and tentative steps towards such an identity. Examples of recent BTech projects in the Graphic Design Programme at the Durban University of Technology (DUT) suggest ways in which students can progress towards a post-colonial relationship with the hegemonic Graphic Design culture. These examples consider, amongst other aspects, the experience of young black designers in the commercial white-dominated design world; their concern about the loss or deterioration of aspects of indigenous culture; and the role of VCD in non-Westernized life and culture; as experienced by black students. Further development of these students' approaches to their projects, as an explicit teaching strategy, could enable students to appropriate Graphic Design processes and technologies, and use these Westernized forms to articulate the perceived post-colonial realities of their lives.

The intention of the paper therefore is to suggest that rootedness in historical knowledge, combined with contemporary tactics, can enable students to construct design identities that are authentic yet capable of engaging with globalized industry, and of contesting a hegemonic disciplinary discourse through a South African-centred approach.

Keywords: *Identity, appropriation, African graphic systems, visual communication, postcolonialism*

© *Copyright 2017 by the Design Education Forum of Southern Africa (www.defsa.org.za)*

Introduction

Recent South African student protests against university fees (the "Fees Must Fall" movement) have incorporated demands for the "de-colonization" of university curricula. What these demands entail for design disciplines needs clarification, given the European origins of not just design curricula, but virtually the whole tertiary education system. Colonial period aspects include the qualifications, the scientific method, and the concept of universal education as a social good, so demands for de-colonization may have far-reaching consequences.

Tertiary education for Graphic Design, or Visual Communication Design (VCD), has also developed from colonial models of vocational and technical education. Consequently, VCD is conceptualized as having at its foundation explicit preparation for employment in the design industry. At the author's institution, the discipline's links with industry are considered fundamental: the National Diploma Course in Graphic Design is substantially integrated with industry, and the BTech in Graphic Design emphasizes employability, integrated with personalized design projects. De-colonization of the curriculum should preferably therefore be balanced against enabling students to achieve employability. This balance is of course skewed by the pervasive influence of globalized technological capital on the industry.

The paper therefore briefly discusses globalization and some responses to it from Post-colonial thinking. It then offers two possible approaches to researching and conceptualizing aspects of a de-colonized design education for Graphic Design/Visual Communication Design (VCD). The first suggests that knowledge of indigenous, historical, visual communication content (African Graphic Systems) can contribute to a sense of both collective and individual identity. The second discusses some tentative individual steps towards such identities and approaches, using examples from recent BTech projects and one MTech in the Graphic Design Programme at the institution. These examples suggest ways in which students can construct post-colonial relationships with the hegemonic Graphic Design culture. Together the two components may contribute to a decolonized curriculum in Visual Communication Design.

The Context of De-colonization

Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin define Globalization as *"the process whereby individual lives and local communities are affected by economic and cultural forces that operate world-wide"* (2007, 100), a process enormously accelerated and empowered by the recent revolution in electronic technology.

Globalization may be included in the older concept of Neo-colonialism, defined as:

> any and all forms of control of the ex-colonies after political independence … [but] in a wider sense the term has come to signify the inability of developing economies… to develop an independent economic and political identity under the pressures of globalization (Ashcroft, Griffiths &Tiffin 2007, p. 146),

and first coined by Nkrumah (1965). Post-colonial critique of neo-colonialism can therefore still be substantially applied to globalization.

Post-colonial concepts were first articulated by Edward Said (1978), when he discussed the relationship between the West and the "Orient" (as defined by the West), and its construction, over hundreds of years, of the inhabitants of the Orient as European culture's “deepest and most recurring image of the Other” (Said 1978, p. 1). He defined the "other" as a negative stereotype projected on to another society, in opposition to Western positive self-stereotypes:

> On the one hand, there are Westerners, and on the other, there are the Arab-Orientals: the former are, in no particular order, rational, peaceful, liberal, logical, capable of holding real values, without natural suspicion; the latter are none of these things. (Said 1978, p. 49)

© Copyright 2017 by the Design Education Forum of Southern Africa (www.defsa.org.za)

This kind of stereotyping or 'othering' has equally been used to devalue African cultures and people during and since colonial times (Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* being a commonly used example).

Post-colonial theory particularly developed in literature, to contest Western authors' dominance of the field. The Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o argued for an Afrocentric approach, demanding that literature in Africa "establish the centrality of Africa" (Ngugi 1972, p. 441) in its studies, albeit "without rejecting other cultural streams, especially the western stream." (Ngugi 1972. p. 439). Calling the process "decolonizing the mind", Ngugi argued that former colonial writers should free themselves from writing in colonial languages:

> Language carries culture, and culture carries, […] the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world. How people perceive themselves affects how they look at their culture, at their politics and at the social production of wealth, at their entire relationship to nature and to other beings. Language is thus inseparable from ourselves as a community of human beings with a specific form and character, a specific history, a specific relationship to the world. (Ngugi 1986. p. 16)

The argument for indigenous language as a valuable cultural inheritance can be extended to visual languages, and thus enable designers not only to maintain their own cultures, but to assert their cultures' value and individuality in the face of the homogenizing influence of globalization. This paper therefore proposes the recovery and revaluation of historical visual communication material as a cultural carrier, as part of decolonizing the VCD curriculum. Examples of such material are discussed in the next section.

Two further concepts from Post-colonial theory are relevant to this paper. Firstly, appropriation, which consists of:

> the ways in which post-colonial societies take over those aspects of the imperial culture – language, forms of writing, film, theatre, even modes of thought and argument such as rationalism, logic and analysis – that may be of use to them in articulating their own social and cultural identities. (Ashcroft, Griffith & Tiffin 2007. p. 15)

Any kind of cultural form imported from the imperial or globalized centre can be appropriated, from advertising to packaging to cartoons and graphic novels, from websites, apps and games to environmental graphics. Any of these forms may be adapted to a use that contests, directly or indirectly, the neo-colonial hegemony of globalization.

The second concept, which seems to ally quite neatly with appropriation, is hybridity. Bhabha (1994) redefined the concept of the hybrid for the post-colonial context to suggest that all cultures are hybrid, that none are pure and 'sui generis', and thus superior to others more obviously mixed:

> hybridity, Bhabha argues, subverts the narratives of colonial power and dominant cultures. The series of inclusions and exclusions on which a dominant culture is premised are deconstructed by the very entry of the formerly-excluded subjects into the mainstream discourse. The dominant culture is contaminated by the linguistic and racial differences of the native self. (Ben Beya 1998)

Reference to hybridity must further acknowledge that a return to a "pure" original pre-colonial condition is practically impossible. The concept can advocate rather that formerly colonized peoples engage with globalization and neo-colonialism; appropriate any useful forms, concepts, and practices; and adapt, develop and turn them to their own purposes, including contesting and resisting globalized power structures. Hybrid forms may integrate colonial, indigenous and completely novel elements in physical structure, purpose, and/or meaning, to produce new and vibrant results. The forms would also differ from one such society to another, depending on the individual history and circumstances of each.

© Copyright 2017 by the Design Education Forum of Southern Africa (www.defsa.org.za)

Hybridity and appropriation in this way have the potential to address both pragmatism about the post-colonial situation and control over cultural destiny. Post-colonialist analysis and criticism offer useful means of interrogating the colonial heritages of fields such as VCD; of reconstructing, retrieving and revaluing the pre-colonial; and developing what may come next: in other words, of de-colonizing design. This process benefits both the designers themselves and the broader society and culture.

Within a society and culture, identity is central to the post-colonial project: how do people see themselves, and what value do they give their self-perceptions? Stets and Burke (2015, p. 225) refer to the concept of social identity as a process of identifying oneself as a member of an 'in-group', by means of desirable criteria; and identifying 'others', not like the self, as the 'out group'. By identifying a range of 'in-groups' in society each self feels part of, a social identity is built up. This identity is defined as much by the 'out-groups' the self rejects, as by the 'in-groups' it embraces.

In this instance the aim would be that local designers self-identify as confident members of an 'in-group' of African cultures, and not so much as 'out-group' individuals excluded from and trying to join the 'in-group' of Western society and culture. For this identification, it would be necessary to demonstrate substantial indigenous material, relevant to the discipline, that students and designers could take ownership of, so they might feel they were meeting external colonial and technological influences on equal terms, rather than merely absorbing them. Mafundikwa has commented that African designers tend to look to Western examples rather than within the continent:

> Designers in Africa struggle with all forms of design because they are more apt to look outward for influence and inspiration. The creative spirit in Africa, the creative tradition, is as potent as it has always been, if only designers could look within. (Mafundikwa 2013)

Unfortunately, education for Visual Communication Design in South Africa pays little attention to African visual communication history. Most courses include art and/or design history: San Rock Art is occasionally covered, and contemporary South African Fine Art or Design practice, but it is unusual to cover visual communication content from the rest of Africa.

The canon of History of Graphic Design and current practices and techniques are all heavily Western-centric, and so devalue African visual traditions. So do all forms of colonization, skewing the colony towards the colonial centre and away from its neighbours. This attitude also shows a hangover from apartheid, that "countries to the north of us", had at best nothing to offer and at worst were a threat to the country.

To counter this situation, indigenous visual communication content, pre-colonial and colonial, can be used to build an independent sense of both collective and individual identity in design students, as African and as South African. Greater attention to these indigenous visual traditions could promote the confidence to appropriate and hybridize colonial forms and turn them to local advantage.

This discussion has argued for the relevance of concepts from Post-colonial and other areas of theory, to the proposition that de-colonization of the design curriculum can be supported through study of both past African visual traditions, and current student-driven projects.

Framing the Past: History of Visual Communication in Africa

This section describes the visual communication functions of selected African visual traditions, and their similarities to Western visual communication models. It suggests the comparability of communication value between the two traditions, and thus the potential relevance of African

© Copyright 2017 by the Design Education Forum of Southern Africa (www.defsa.org.za)

material to VCD. This process accepts a wide understanding of visual communication and its functions.

Extremely rapid recent developments in electronic technology have revolutionized current practices in Visual Communication Design and hugely expanded the discipline's scope. Design for print has diminished in importance, and may even disappear from a brief entirely. A designer may now employ and be expected to understand communication through not just text and image for print; but also human gesture, expression, drama; ergonomics and position in space; sound and time. In other words, they need to consider a time-based visual-gestural-aural matrix in which the audience's preconceptions, history, and experience in the communication, must be considered, even while the emphasis of the project remains visual.

Visual communication traditions in Africa have included many of these aspects of communication (if without electronics) for hundreds if not thousands of years. African Graphic Systems and traditions of visual communication present numerous parallels to this range of designed communication by visual means. Over eighty indigenous alphabetic and graphic systems and visual communication traditions from across Africa are identified in the literature, a figure almost certainly incomplete. However, the literature almost always stems from other disciplines, such as Anthropology or Art History. Very little from a Visual Communication Design perspective could be found. Mafundikwa (2003) is one of the few.

Geographically these systems occur across Africa. Chronologically they range from prehistoric and pre-contact societies, through slavery and colonialism to the present day. Some are represented in the literature by a few glyphs or symbols, whereas others may include hundreds of characters and extensive analysis. At least twenty indigenous phonetic systems (alphabets and syllabaries) are documented, in addition to the Roman and Arabic alphabets and their adaptations. At least sixty symbolic systems have also been documented, in which the visual symbol represents an idea or concept, rather than a sound in a given language. All of these systems and symbols merit study and analysis from a visual communication point of view, with a view to understanding what they may offer to culture, identity and visual language. The following examples briefly describe some functional similarities between indigenous traditions, and relate them to Western design.

Example 1: Visual identity

Amongst the Ndengese people, part of the Kuba grouping in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the roles, actions and status of a chief or king embodied values of political and social authority (Faik-Nzuji 1992). These values were communicated by, amongst other means, bodily scarification and wood sculpture, two visual media seldom considered by Graphic Designers. Westernized viewers may regard scarification as ugly or barbaric, but the issue here is the communication enabled by it. Conventionalized geometric patterns and shapes communicate information regarding the qualities and attributes of the king, by their depiction and placement on the body (see Figure 1.). Such meaning cannot be communicated beyond the king's presence, but this limitation is overcome by the representation of his personal composition of symbols and patterns on wooden sculptures. These can then be transported to remote areas to communicate the king's values and authority. They function as texts, conveying visual information relating to the king's authority, and validating and certifying the messengers who accompany them. They function in the same way as a corporate identity, a logo on a letterhead or a billboard: as visual representations of authority. We see these devices and accept them as official, as representing the authority of the company or organization. We see them on packaging, and believe that we have a genuine product. Western corporate identities are constructed using systems of semiotics culturally appropriate to the society. Thus, they are comparable to the communication functions of scarification and sculpture in the Ndengese tradition. The difference is that a piece of visual communication such as the wooden representation of kingship carries with it broader and deeper and more specific cultural content than the semiotics of Western corporate identity.

© Copyright 2017 by the Design Education Forum of Southern Africa (www.defsa.org.za)

Figure 1: Ndengese Statue of a chief (c.1890)

Source: Online: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Statue_-_Ndengese,_ West_Kasai,_ DRC_-_Royal_Museum_for_Central_Africa_-_DSC06670.JPG. Accessed 10 August 2017.

Example 2: Social inclusion and exclusion

Most precolonial sub-Saharan societies were oral, and used visual communication systems in a contextual way: their systems could convey information as accurately as alphabetic writing, but each symbol or glyph might convey a range of concepts.

In many of these societies religious or spiritual knowledge is considered intrinsically dangerous. Only initiated elders may access it, and use it to communicate permitted details about history, beliefs, and culture. Members of the *Mbudye* society of the Luba people of the DRC employed a carved wooden “Memory Board” or *Lukasa*, approximately rectangular, which bears a pattern of attached beads or engraved geometric figures or pictographs (See Figure 2.). Such patterns represent meaning by their position on the surface and relative to other beads or marks, including:

> the spatial paradigm of the Luba royal court… a mental geography that maps and orders the universe, the kingdom, human relations, and the mind. The physical and conceptual layout of the court … Luba cosmology, … the beaded studs positioned upon it allow for the passages, contours, random excursions, exits, entrances, rebounds, ricochets and thresholds that characterise the active social processes of memory. (Roberts & Roberts 1996, p. 41)

This meaning is also contingent on when, how, where and to whom the *Lukasa* is 'read'. Despite this contingency, it is a fixed record of cultural memory, and as such functions as a text. The 'visual grammar' of the *Lukasa* represents information in a continuously contemporary process that can reinterpret history and knowledge for each re-telling. Because of the secret and dangerous nature

© Copyright 2017 by the Design Education Forum of Southern Africa (www.defsa.org.za)

of this kind of knowledge part of its function must be that the visual language is not easy for the uninitiated to understand. Forbidden knowledge is also discussed in one of the student projects below (Example 6).

This example also illustrates the role of literacies in inclusion or exclusion within a society: the Luba limit their literacies to an initiated elder elite. In our own society, those excluded by any factor from either scribal or computer literacy are now excluded from many forms of engagement with the world.

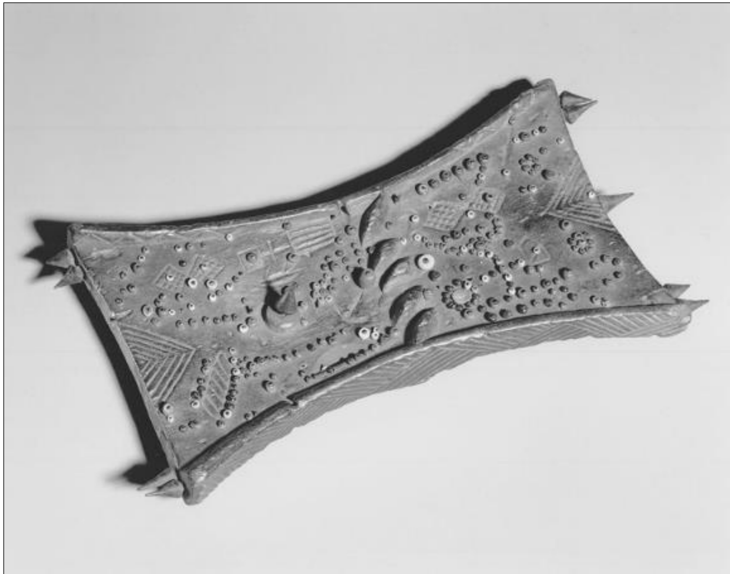

Figure 2: Luba "*Lukasa*" memory board.

Source:online:https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lukasa_(Luba)#/media/File:Brooklyn_ Museum _76.20.4_Lukasa_Memory_Board.jpg. Accessed 10 August 2017.

Example 3: Alphabetic writing in Africa.

Alphabets and syllabaries in northern Africa (Egypt, Ethiopia and the Maghreb) pre-date the colonial period by thousands of years, but most of the alphabetic systems in sub-Saharan Africa stem from contact with external influences, including colonialism. Some e.g. the "Africa Alphabet" and the "Pan-Nigerian Alphabet" (Coulmas 1996), adapt the Latin Alphabet, and others the Arabic alphabet, to African languages. Others are completely new systems, such as the Bamum or Vai alphabets.

Either adaptation or origination of writing systems would be a positive response to inadequate alphabets: many of the hundreds of African languages incorporate significant sounds and tones omitted from the Latin or Arabic alphabets. Those alphabets' functionality may be criticized for inexactness of correspondence between sound and letter, providing one impetus for the development of Coulmas' alphabets above.

Given the inexact correspondence between letter and sound in English, this may not seem important, but any new alphabet must be seen to represent an improvement over the Latin alphabet for English. The role of the designer would be to make such an alphabet as visually functional as possible. Again, this issue is paralleled by a student project below (Example 2.

Furthermore, the development of indigenous alphabets for indigenous languages can be seen as a strategic response to colonial and other outside influences. Dalby (1967, p. 9) describes how Momolu Duwalu Bukele, the inventor of the Vai script of Liberia:

© Copyright 2017 by the Design Education Forum of Southern Africa (www.defsa.org.za)

was much impressed by the way in which [Europeans] were able to communicate over long distances by letter, and he became consumed by the idea that the Vai people should have their own form of writing. It seems almost certain that the main impetus behind the … Vai script was the desire to acquire the power and advantages that were seen to belong to the literate Europeans, Afro-American settlers and Mandingo Muslims with whom the Vai came in contact. (Dalby 1967, p. 9) (See Figure 3.)

Thus either the adaptation or development of alphabets can be seen as a move towards cultural resistance, independence and de-colonization, even while making use of a concept (writing) introduced by colonial forces, in a prime example of appropriation.

Based on examples such as these, this paper argues for the research, recovery, revaluation and dissemination of largely ignored aspects of the history of African visual communication. Such efforts would contest the exclusion of indigenous visual communication and visual identity from a discipline still largely defined by globalized powers. Given the apparent scarcity of literature, huge potential exists to research and analyse these systems in Visual Communication Design terms.

Figure 3. The Vai Syllabary. Momolu Duwalu Bukele.

Source: Redesigned from Coulmas 1996, p. 538

The next section presents a selection of student projects from the author's institution, some of which, as mentioned, offer parallels to the examples discussed, but with the added relevance that the students are working in contemporary design.

Framing the Present: up from below

The BTech Graphic Design course at the institution consists of a single self-generated and self-motivated student project, in which students conduct research and develop a body of design work in response. This self-motivation has enabled and encouraged significant numbers of formerly disadvantaged students to develop very personal projects, addressing various aspects of their culture and life experience through the medium of graphic design. Students have developed a range of approaches in their projects, but these examples focus on projects researching social and cultural concerns, often influenced by globalized pressures. One MTech student's work is included because of similarity in approach.

Example 1: The MTech student investigated the breakdown of transmission of isiZulu as a first language to children. Her initial intention was to research early language learning and develop material to encourage and assist the child to learn and speak isiZulu, and promote the language's value to the child. Her research indicated, however, that the problem lay with parents encouraging their children to speak English, as the language of status and 'development'. It can be considered a feature of cultural Neo-colonialism that indigenous languages are de-valued in the minds of their speakers to the point that they see no value in retaining them. This behaviour also matches precisely the early stages of 'language death', the process by which speakers of one language abandon it for another, to the extent that their original language dies out (Crystal 2000). I first observed this devaluation personally in Zimbabwe in the late 1980s, when an indigenous language speaker described his mother tongue as a "rubbish language". To change these beliefs, the student's project turned to an attempt to revalue the language in parents' minds.

Example 2: Similarly, one BTech student investigated the shortage of graphic or visual material in the sePedi language, despite government policies and institutions promoting all official languages. Research in her home area resulted in the discovery of only two billboards, a few school readers and government documents, a print newspaper she couldn't find a copy of, and no online material in sePedi at all. This paucity suggests firstly, that importance is not given to visual or graphic material in this language, to anything like competitiveness with English in terms of social, educational or cultural status or usefulness; and secondly that few business or social entities consider it worth producing visual material using the language. The project therefore developed prototype sePedi graphic material, including a font for sePedi characters and a publication promoting the use of the language to home speakers.

Example 3: A third student researched the Venda culture, intending to promote it in Durban. As a Venda speaker, he was shocked by his Zulu-speaking peers' ignorance of one of the official languages and cultures of the country. Fieldwork led him to realize that he himself was substantially ignorant of many aspects of his own culture, which strongly influenced the resulting design work. His conclusions suggested that the Venda language and culture had simply been overwhelmed by English, Afrikaans, and international popular culture.

Example 4: This project investigated the *izikhothane* sub-culture of conspicuous consumption amongst South African youth, out of concern for what the student felt were skewed social values regarding status and competition. Her research indicated the role of contemporary international influences in manipulating the youth to feel that they can only validate themselves through consumption. Specifically, in this sub-culture the consumption must be of expensive and high-status branded products, to an extent that can entail the deliberate destruction of the desired consumables.

These four projects are notable for their engagement with the damaging effects of globalization in the South African context. The students have attempted to investigate and address these

© Copyright 2017 by the Design Education Forum of Southern Africa (www.defsa.org.za)

effects, and to contest them through promotion of alternative attitudes, viewpoints and material. In doing so, it is suggested that they are taking ownership of the visual communication process, and contesting the dominance of globalized influences and concerns. Two further examples are discussed in slightly more detail, as they raise more contentious issues that may be encountered by students, lecturers, and practitioners of VCD in the 'de-colonizing' process.

Example 5: This BTech student has developed her project around design employment and professional practice. She originally intended to investigate the gap between existing Graphic Design curricula and what graduates need to know to enter the advertising industry, but her experience as a design intern has radically changed her focus. She works at an agency apparently still heavily influenced by the past: she is the only black creative in an office in which the other creatives are all white, there is one black copywriter, and the technical staff are all Indian. Other agencies have achieved considerably more progressive social attitudes in their workforce integration and management behaviour.

This agency is having difficulties because their creatives appear so unfamiliar with the local mass market that their campaigns are failing to reach and persuade their intended audiences. In particular they are not reaching the lower economic levels of society, black consumers and first-language isiZulu speakers. As a result, although only a junior creative, this student has unofficially been made the representative of, and authority on, all black society. She has been shocked at the basic levels of ignorance displayed by her co-workers, such as what kind of clothing township children wear. Consequently, her project now aims to identify the most important areas of knowledge her colleagues need, and to develop materials explaining these issues in ways that they can accept.

Her project has identified an intersection of race and class issues in the design industry, and an apparent inadequacy of standard practices to deal with resulting professional problems. The company's management supports progressive industrial relations, but the office has not succeeded in moving beyond the neo-colonial bubble and addressing or integrating what changes might be required in employees' thinking, working and creative habits.

The project demonstrates the clear challenge of how an integrated society can develop, and how citizens of this country can understand each other, when they understand so little of each others' lives. It indicates the gulf between sections of South African society, and the need to engage with the 'other', whether in the rest of the continent or next door. This gulf indicates a moral or societal need, but it is more likely to be addressed for business reasons than from any moral or societal impetus. Here, perhaps, the profit motive can be used to 'decolonizing' ends.

Example 6: In a last example a student investigated the development of clear, accurate and informative packaging for traditional healers. Her intentions were to develop packaging that would protect the medicines and provide information about their contents and proper use comparable to that provided with westernized medicines. Her lecturers considered this a valuable project, given a recent source claiming that some 80% of the population preferred to consult traditional healers over Westernized doctors (Tshabalala-Msimang 2005). The student investigated packaging and information design for such purposes, and developed excellent prototypes incorporating both instructional illustrations and text. However, she ran into a number of difficulties stemming from cultural differences.

Chief amongst these was the attitude towards professional information: the healers she worked with were extremely reluctant to include information about their ingredients, as required in Western medical packaging. Here was a prime example of the need for a revision of designers' assumptions about a basic difference in attitude between two sections of South African society: one which assumes that health information should be freely available (at least if paid for); and another which takes it equally as automatic that some such information should be secret. This view of information is common outside Westernized societies, as the above examples from West

© Copyright 2017 by the Design Education Forum of Southern Africa (www.defsa.org.za)

Africa illustrate (Section 3). Secondly, the healers resisted the introduction of purpose-made packaging as being too expensive. Finally, there was a preference for reusable forms of packaging such as glass bottles. In order to enable this re-cycling of bottles and jars, the student proposed the application of a wide strip of matt black paint which could be written on with chalk.

This project was problematic for lecturing staff. In hindsight, our assessment over-emphasized how 'good design' should look and function for a Westernized, English-speaking audience fully acclimated to the Graphic Design canon (i.e. ourselves), not the successful functionality of the student's solution, given the context and the predispositions of the intended audience, i.e. sangomas. The final work appeared to reject successful Western information design in favour of less legible hand-written information, but the point was that the latter would have been acceptable to the clients (sangomas), and would have successfully communicated publicly permissible information to end-users. The project thus took a step away from a colonially-defined norm of 'good' design towards a form appropriate to its context.

Conclusion

These students have not all consciously engaged in projects explicitly theorized to de-colonize BTech or MTech curricula, but it is suggested that their projects are a step in that direction. They have sought to balance producing marketable work in an almost entirely Western-dominated or globalized industry, with investigating and re-valuing aspects of their lives and cultures which exist outside the norms of Western graphic design.

The projects and students mentioned therefore embody, in my view, the appropriation of western graphic design and the development of hybrid forms, for purposes and in ways appropriate to a de-colonized curriculum, along with investigation and implicit critique of the colonized situation in which they live. The first three examples critique and oppose the loss of cultural identity, language and other aspects of culture, making use of current practices in graphic design to do so, and appropriating these techniques to use them against the effects they have caused. The fourth and fifth examples likewise appropriate current graphic design thinking and techniques to critique and oppose social consequences of globalization, in these instances as consumerism and patronising work behaviour. The last example has applied design research techniques to a question outside Westernized society, with the result that the design work itself has had to incorporate non-Westernised thinking about knowledge and design. Here the appropriation was of design thinking, hybridising with indigenous priorities and views of knowledge.

These projects represent an early stage of the development of new and de-colonised visual communication forms, which have yet to demonstrate the full range and depth that could emerge from processes of research, acceptance of different cultural values and visual traditions, and hybridisation with existing Westernised approaches and techniques. The potential role playable by content from indigenous visual traditions in this process has barely been touched, owing primarily to the shortage of literature dealing with such traditions from a Visual Communication Design perspective.

Students have shown interest in these directions for themselves, through the concerns addressed in their projects. These types of approaches can be encouraged and expanded, and explicitly theorized. Such an approach has the potential to contribute to a curriculum and vision for research and design that can best embody hybridity and appropriation: incorporating the strengths of different traditions to produce a richer, more appropriate, and more grounded form of design, that acknowledges the traditions of the continent, that accepts the needs and values of all its audiences, and aims to communicate effectively with them in their own terms.

The students' work cannot be considered 'pure' Western graphic design, because the canon for that discipline is only beginning to acknowledge the kind of differences in culture, language, audience and context with which these students have engaged. Likewise, it is not a pure

© Copyright 2017 by the Design Education Forum of Southern Africa (www.defsa.org.za)

"unWestern" or de-colonized form of visual communication, because that is unlikely to result in employability in the current globalized industry. These students have thus in their projects taken ownership of what they consider relevant design issues. The agency shown indicates the viability of the approach, and its potential to expand in both depth and complexity in the future.

'De-colonizing' the curriculum has here been addressed with reference to two possible strategies: the use of history for identity, and student agency in designing their own studies. The paper has presented examples from both history of indigenous visual communication, and recent student projects, with brief indications of commonalities. A 'de-colonized' curriculum is bound to encompass a much wider range of strategies: but the suggestion is that these strategies can contribute to its eventual development.

© Copyright 2017 by the Design Education Forum of Southern Africa (www.defsa.org.za)

References

Ashcroft, W., Griffiths, G., and Tiffin, H. (eds.). 2003 (2nd ed.). *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*. London: Routledge.

Ashcroft, W., Griffiths, G., and Tiffin, H. (eds.). 2007 (2nd ed.). *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts.* Abingdon: Routledge.

Ben Beya, A. 1998. *Mimicry, Ambivalence, and Hybridity*. (Online). Available from: https://scholarblogs.emory.edu/postcolonialstudies/2014/06/21/mimicry-ambivalence-and-hybridity/ . Accessed 15 July 2017.

Bhabha, H. 1994. *The Location of Culture.* London: Routledge.

Coulmas, F. 1996. *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Writing Systems.* Oxford: Blackwell.

Crystal, D. 2000. *Language death.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Dalby, D. 1967. A Survey of the Indigenous Scripts of Liberia and Sierra Leone: Vai, Mende, Loma, Kpelle and Bassa, in *African Language Studies*, **8.** pp 1 - 51. London: University of London.

Faik-Nzuji, C. 1992. *Symboles Graphiques en Afrique Noir.* Louvain-la-Neuve: CILTADE.

Mafundikwa, S. 2003. *Afrikan Alphabets: The Story of Writing in Africa.* New York: Mark Batty Publishers.

Mafundikwa, S. 2013. *Ingenuity and Elegance in Ancient African Alphabets*. (Online). Available from: https://www.ted.com/talks/saki_mafundikwa_ingenuity_and_elegance_in_ancient_african_alphabets#t-265181. Accessed: 12 July 2017.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o. 1972. *Homecoming: Essays.* London: Heinemann, 1972.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o. 1986. *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature.* London: James Currey.

Nkrumah, K. 1965. *Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism*. London: Nelson.

Roberts, M.N. and Roberts, A.F. 1996. *Luba Art and the Making of Memory.* Munich: Prestel.

Said, E. 1978. *Orientalism.* London: Routledge.

Stets, J. and Burke, P. 2015. Identity Theory and Social Identity. in *Social Psychology Quarterly,* Vol. 63, No. 3 (Sep., 2000), pp. 224-237 Washington: American Sociological Association.

Thompson, R.F. 1974. *African Art in Motion.* Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Thompson, R.F. 1983. *Flash of the Spirit*. New York: Vintage.

Tshabalala-Msimang, M. 2005. *Closing Remarks at the International Conference on Natural Products and Molecular Therapy*. Available from: http://www.doh.gov.za/docs/sp/2005/sp0114.html. Accessed 8th February 2006.

© Copyright 2017 by the Design Education Forum of Southern Africa (www.defsa.org.za)