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#Decolonise!

Design educators reflecting on the call for the decolonisation of education

In Your Hands & Self-Portrait: Introductory Spatial Design Exercises in the First-year Studio

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Abstract

This paper considers the discrepancies in the visual literacy of students prior to entering spatial design education at a public higher-educational institution. Because the school subjects Visual Arts and Engineering Graphics and Design provide feeder skills to visual literacy, students with exposure to these subjects tend to have higher visual literacy than students who are unlikely to have received exposure to these subjects. This is problematic because Visual Arts and Engineering Graphics and Design are not on offer in all public South African schools.

As educators from a public higher-educational institution endeavouring to provide equitable learning opportunities, how do we, through spatial design education, relate to first-year students with an awareness of differences in student 'readiness' impacted by schooling opportunities? What role can spatial design exercises play in alleviating these discrepancies while engaging all students in the first-year studio?

This paper focuses on first-year spatial design students and the design exercises In your Hands and Self-Portrait. These introductory design briefs focus on the development of students' three-dimensional spatial design skills with awareness of the impact of students' school subjects on studio outputs. In your Hands requires the creation of a support with wire for stone using stone, wire and pliers. Thereafter follows a group discussion, reflection and iteration. Self-Portrait requires the creation of a three-dimensional self-portrait of the inner and outer being using wire and thereafter, a projected shadow drawing of the portrait using light while drawing with graphite on paper. A selection of projects conducted by first-year spatial design students of architecture, interior architecture and landscape architecture in 2017 at the Department of Architecture, University of Pretoria has been documented.

With the focus of spatial design education in the first-year studio being on the development of three-dimensional design skills, differences in students' schooling backgrounds played a reduced role in impacting project outcomes. The introduction of alternative media, stone and wire, to which most students had limited exposure, provides an even playing field. Communalism as a means of learning together was explored through group discussion and iteration of the exercise, providing students an opportunity for self-review and improvement in their approach. Self-Portrait allows a reflection of self-understanding in a three-dimensional format. The shadow projection reinforces the role of two-dimensional drawings as representational of three-dimensional spatial products as a key skill to spatial design

practice which redefines the two-dimensional drawing from being an artistic output to becoming a representational image.

The two exercises provide a relevant discussion as introductory exercises focusing on skills development in the spatial design fields through the three-dimensional. This approach allows a fairer learning opportunity for students regardless of their school subjects, which could have enhanced their skills in visual literacy. This is a worthwhile case study for spatial design educators in the context of the call for decolonised education.

Keywords:

Spatial Design Education, Spatial Design Exercises, Studio learning, Three-dimensional, Two-dimensional

Introduction

This paper documents the spatial design educators' measures in mitigating the advantageous impact of prior training in visual literacy through the exposure to the school subjects Visual Arts and Engineering Graphics and Design (EGD) in creating disparate learning opportunities in spatial design education in the combined first-year studio at the Department of Architecture, University of Pretoria. The advantage created by exposure to these subjects is considered problematic since Visual Arts and EGD are not subjects offered in all public schools and exposure to these are often a result of advantaged students who are afforded a costlier school education. Since these subjects are not entry criteria to the spatial design courses at the University of Pretoria, non-exposure to these subjects should not impede a student's ability to succeed in these courses. The paper considers the difficulties in transition experienced generally by students from secondary school to higher education and focuses on factors which can ameliorate or exacerbate this transition. The links between disadvantaged backgrounds and higher-education success are established. The first-year is seen as the critical point for predictability of student retention as the transition between school and higher education is a point of heightened vulnerability for students due to their adjustment to a new environment and academic expectations. The argument is made with specific focus on the first-year spatial design student who is confronted with the additional unfamiliarity of the studio environment, which is in contrast to the typical school classroom and their expectations of university lifestyle. The exercises have been formulated with consideration of the responsibility of the spatial design educator in a higher-educational institution to provide fair learning opportunities for all students (whether advantaged or disadvantaged, regardless of their prior exposure to visual literacy) while addressing the impacts of past injustice through the call for decolonising higher education. The exercises *In your Hands* and *Self-Portrait* will be explained, their intentions highlighted and a selection of 2017 student outputs will be demonstrated with reflection on the exercises.

Method

A combination of primary and secondary data sources is used to establish the problem. The exploration of literature relevant to the transition of students from school to higher education and the unique characteristics of spatial design education and cultivating design thinking is conducted. Quantitative data is used to illustrate the visual literacy skills scape in the spatial design first-year studio through the collection of student numbers and their subject histories. The spatial design exercises, *In your Hands* and *Self-Portrait*, are explored through a combination of reflective writing and examples of outcomes are documented through the photographic documentation of selected student work from the class of 2017. The interpretation of these exercises in the context of the identified problem is highlighted.

The first-year student in spatial design education

Transitioning from school to higher education

The transition into higher education places the new first-year student in a vulnerable position. For those transitioning from secondary school, the university environment poses a new and unfamiliar environment (Lowe & Cook 2003, pp. 44-45) in which the student is re-defining their identity (Wilcox, Winn & Fyvie-Gauld 2005, p. 712). The differences in expectation of higher educational lifestyle and reality could be a revelation to students which may be difficult to overcome (Lowe & Cook 2003, pp. 54-55). Those who have relocated from their homes are threatened with the absence of social support previously provided by family, which requires adjustment through establishing new friendships and redefining their individual identities (Wilcox, Winn & Fyvie-Gauld 2005 p. 713). Further, the academic expectation of students to transform to autonomous, self-managed learners (Lowe & Cook

2003, p. 54) in an impersonal environment leaves students feeling unsupported (Briggs, Clark & Hall 2012, p.6, 18). Students who are able to integrate socially adjust easier due to the support of their peers (Krause & Coates 2008, pp. 502-503). Diversity is a factor in inhibiting social cohesion. It is affected by socio-economic backgrounds, which in turn affects a student's ability to adapt to higher education due to reduced familiarity with the higher educational context. According to Leese (2010, p. 243) this difference in socio-economic status can inhibit social interactions and delay the ability of students of contrasting backgrounds to find social support among peers. Students of diverse backgrounds and those who are of poor socio-economic backgrounds are more vulnerable in adapting to the higher educational context (Briggs, Clark & Hall 2012, pp. 5-6). The design student from a poor socio-economic background is particularly vulnerable to incompletion of studies due to the unlikelihood of them being exposed to design disciplines as a result of subject offering limitations in state-resourced schools (Saidi & Nazier 2011, pp. 183, 185). Briggs, Clark and Hall (2012, p. 6) asserts that these difficulties in transition could lead to students deregistering, which is particularly problematic in the case of those students who might have been able to transform their socio-economic status through higher education. The role of the educator in addressing the threats of incomplete studies is therefore crucial. A consideration in the formation and delivery of design knowledge is a key area where positive change can be effected (Saidi & Nazier 2011, p. 83). This is pertinent in the context of decolonised education, which calls to relieve the impacts of historical marginalisation and colonial advantage in higher education. As educators from a public higher-educational institution endeavouring to provide equitable learning opportunities, how do we, through spatial design education, relate to first-year students with an awareness of differences in student readiness impacted by schooling opportunities? What role can spatial design exercises play in alleviating these discrepancies while engaging all students in the first-year studio?

The problem: visual literacy and spatial design education

School subjects can directly affect the student's ability to adapt to the expectations of spatial design education. Visual Arts and EGD both contribute to visual literacy which improves the spatial design student's ability to communicate through enhanced drawing skills. Visual Arts training affords students the ability to work with a variety of artistic media, to communicate through expressive imagery with a knowledge of principles of effective visual communication. EGD enables students to draw with technical accuracy and understanding of the two-dimensional drawing as a to-scale representation of a space or object. According to Saidi and Nazier (2011, p. 185) exposure to Visual Arts is limited to well-resourced schools and the discrepancies in visual literacy between students with and without art training are a reality. Since neither Visual Arts nor EGD are prerequisite school subjects for admission to studies in the spatial design disciplines at the University of Pretoria, it is reasonable to expect of the design course to encompass the teaching of visual literacy skills required of a spatial designer. The obvious differences in students' exposure to the school subjects of Visual Arts and EGD result in a group of first-year students with contrasting aptitudes for visual literacy. This is problematic in that not all public schools offer Visual Arts or EGD. Of the public schools that do offer these subjects, most are inaccessible to financially disadvantaged students, especially those of informal settlement or rural school backgrounds (Saidi & Nazier 2011, p. 185). This poses a dualistic threat to spatial design education in that students from resourced backgrounds may be better equipped to handle spatial design education. Students without prior training in Visual Arts or EGD are less likely to apply for study programmes in design disciplines and those who do get there may have limited chances of success (Saidi & Nazier 2011, p. 185). Conversely, students with prior visual literacy risk boredom and disinterest should skills training be repeated.

A survey was conducted by the authors using data gathered from student selection files of the 2017 first-year students enrolled in ONT 100. Retaining the anonymity of students, we counted the number of students who had completed Visual Arts and/or EGD as school subjects and recorded them in order to determine the impact of the discrepancies in overall visual literacy of the first-year studio.

The table below indicates the percentage of students in the spatial design first-year class (2017) and which of these subjects they took at school:

Table 1: First-year spatial design students and their school subjects. Data collected from 2017 selection files

No of first-year 2017 students with school subject/s:	No. of students (out of 97 in first-year 2017)	Percentage of first-year 2017 class
Visual arts	14	14,4%
Engineering Graphics and Design (EGD)	42	43,4%
Both Visual Arts and Engineering Graphics and Design (EGD)	15	15,4%
Neither Visual Arts nor Engineering Graphics and Design (EGD)	26	26,8%

The contrast in subject background that is evident from Table 1 has the potential to result in a first-year class of contrasting aptitudes in visual literacy, with the majority of students having received training in Visual Arts, EGD, or both. The 26,8% of first-year students having not taken these subjects at school are a minority and may be at a back-foot in commencement of spatial design studies when held to the same standards of their peers with Visual Arts and/or EGD training. Given the collaborative nature of the spatial design studio environment where work is constantly on display, the showcasing of visual communication skills displayed by peers with Visual Arts and/or EGD training has the potential to diminish the confidence of the 26,8% without this advantage. This is a sizeable number that motivates consideration by the spatial design educator. It is a difficult scenario to navigate for the educator who has the responsibility to create a fair and relevant learning opportunity for all. Given the vulnerability of the first-year student in transitioning to higher education, it is critical that the educator address this contrast in literacy with deliberation.

Communalism

Communalism is a social concept which recognizes the interdependence of community members and the individual's responsibility in acting towards the well-being of the community (Boykin et al 1997, p. 409). Although communalism is a transcultural concept (Enslin & Horsthemke 2004, p. 549), it is a key characteristic of traditional African philosophy, referred to as Ubuntu (Boykin et al 1997, p. 410). Ubuntu defines an individual person on the basis of their community (Venter 2004, p. 150). Because communalism in the traditional African context has specific applications to indigenous social structures and roles (Venter 2004, p. 152), finding its relevance in a contemporary, multi-cultural environment is risky, with the most contentious dichotomy occurring between the Euro-centric orientation towards individualism and the African position on collectivism (Venter 2004, p. 152).

Regarded from the perspective of education, communalism places emphasis on collaboration and community as a source of knowledge building (Passi & Vahtivuori 1998, p. 259 in Tella 1998). Venter (2004, p. 152) recognizes communalism as a valuable concept for African education by emphasising its roots in “humanness”. She asserts that there is a need for a unique, meaningful and relevant South African educational identity (Venter 2004, p. 155) and that the concept of communalism should be reconstructed to facilitate the learning needs of a contemporary African context (Venter 2004, p. 156).

Following Venter’s call for interpretation, we acknowledge the strengths of communalism as a contribution to a uniquely African education based on interdependence and community while engaging critically with its traditional roots by re-interpreting its application for the contemporary teaching and learning needs of our spatial design first-year students, their diverse backgrounds and the studio environment. The strengths of communalism in education lie in collaboration, interdependence and co-operation, principles which are beneficial to spatial design exercises, a studio-based education, and our students.

The personal atmosphere of the studio environment encourages dialogue, peer interaction and is a catalyst for socially cohesive class groups. The class group is viewed as a community, with individual students offering the potential to contribute each other’s success. With careful facilitation by spatial design educators, the perspectives of the students as individuals within a community may be broadened and could benefit from the diversity in backgrounds of its students. It is recognised that the design of the introductory exercises in first-year of spatial design education require careful consideration and can play a critical role in equalising the impact of incongruities in prior visual literacy exposure on the transition into spatial design education.

We acknowledge the value that individual students bring to the learning environment based on their unique backgrounds. Through formulating the exercises, we account for prior knowledge and the individual background of each student to build a greater sense of self investment, contribute to the knowledge of their peers and view self- and cross- interest in the work produced (Feigenberg in Dutton 1991, p. 266).

Introductory first-year exercises

Exercise 1: In your Hands

In your Hands was the first exercise presented to first-year students when they arrived in the design studio at the beginning of 2017. It was inspired by the first-class, first-project designed by Stephen Temple (2008, pp. 199-208). Having received instruction to arrive prepared with one metre length of wire, a stone and pliers, students were handed the design brief that required them to design and construct an orderly support for a stone using wire at least one fist away from a table’s surface.

Apart from following Temple’s (2008, p. 199) initiative to introduce the spatial designer to activated thinking and the possibilities of making, the exercise is further intended to introduce the student to the concept of spatial manipulation as a three-dimensional practice. The choice of the materials, stone and wire, is an attempt to “even the playing field” (Botes 2012, p. 133) by providing students with a medium that is not typical to artistic or drawing production. Those students with a background in Visual Arts are unfamiliar with producing art through the medium of wire. Similarly, students with an EGD background are confronted with an introductory exercise that demands spatial manipulation on a three-dimensional level which challenges their training proficiency in visual communication through two-dimensional drawings.

The perception that the drawing of plans or sections as the primary skill informing spatial design is disrupted on day one and the process is reversed, with the student having to first

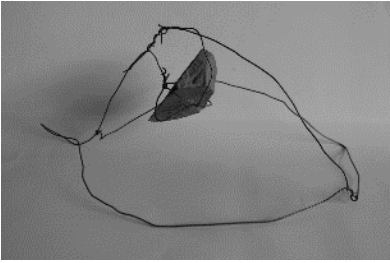
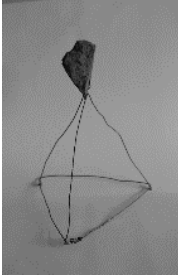
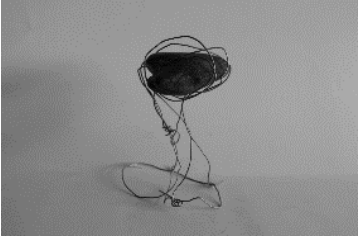
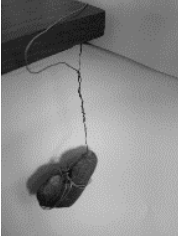
create the three-dimensional object, then two-dimensionally document, as the second part of the exercise, five views of this object with care to capture its characteristic features such as light, shadow, texture, materiality, patterns, markings and the like.

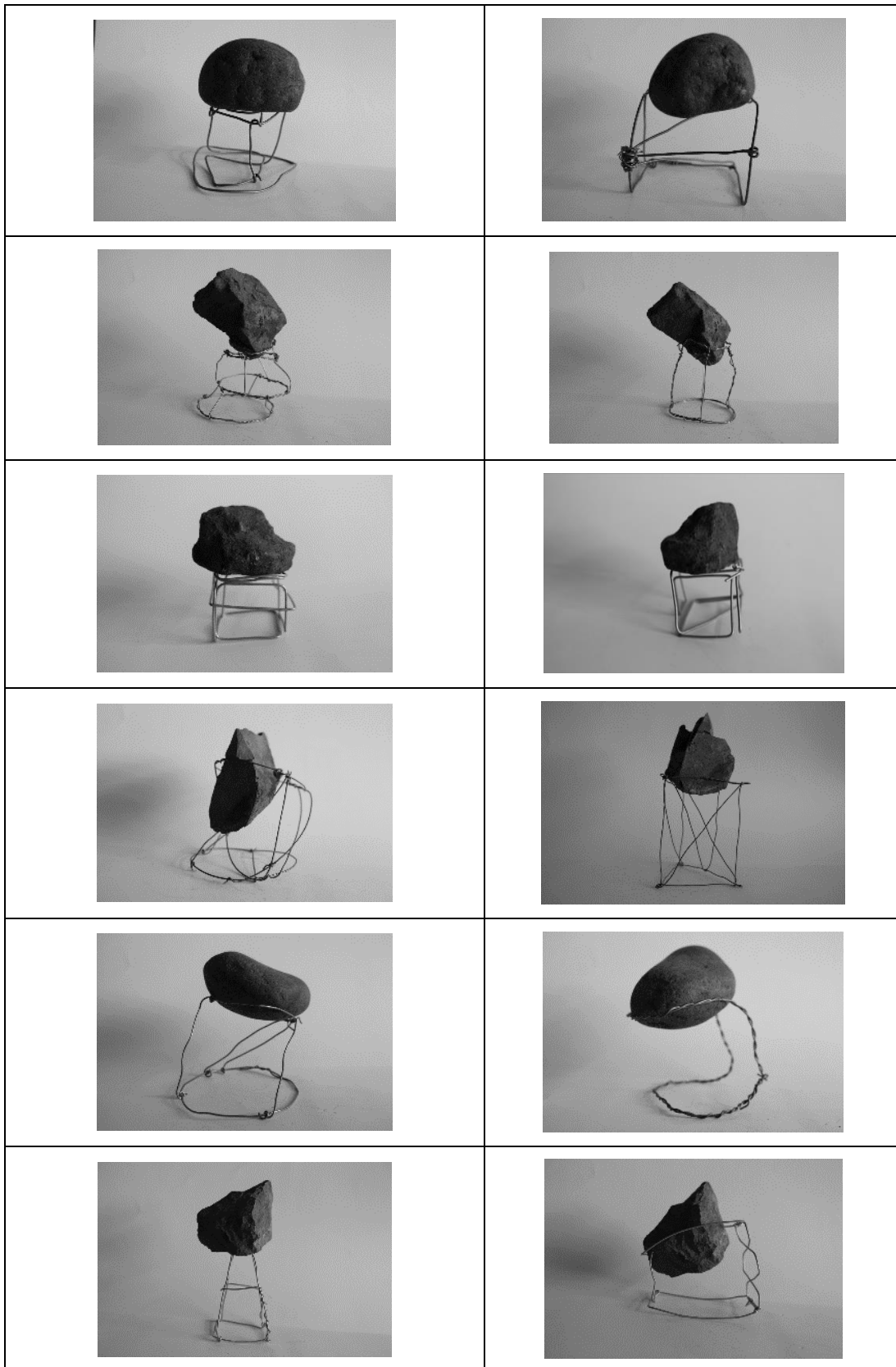
Although the prescribed medium of graphite and paper may be familiar territory to students with a background in Visual Arts and the concept of representation through drawing familiar to those of EGD backgrounds, the requirement of representing a design product in ways which communicate spatial qualities is a call for design thinking which acts beyond an image of visual appeal alone. This exercise is an iteration in spatial understanding. It requires students to reflect on what they have built and to translate and communicate aspects of the object in space in another medium.

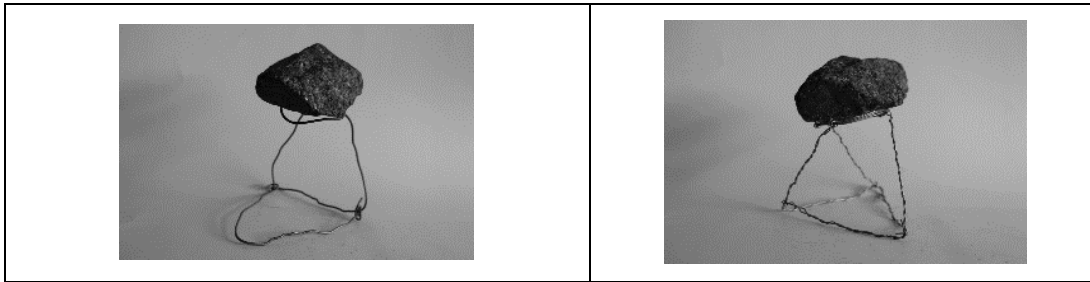
After a studio discussion and exhibition of all three-dimensional products of the exercise, students were asked, as the third part of the exercise, to reflect on their first attempt and approach the exercise of making again. The opportunity for iteration emphasizes the need for critical reflection in the design process, the ability to grow a design product through revisiting decisions and finding discretion in self-reflection. The opportunity to improve can help students who may have struggled with the first iteration to build confidence and prove to themselves that they are capable of fulfilling the brief. The group discussion, apart from stimulating a socially communal studio environment, enables the influence of collaborative ideas on the individual design process, a method which is co-operative with communalism (Higgs 2011, p. 42). The exercise highlights the possibility of multiple design solutions having viability. Moreover, it stresses the notion that there is no one single answer to spatial design. Having seen what is produced by their peers and critically discussing the different design processes and approaches give students the opportunity to process what has been done before and to choose to respond with a design product that is an improvement to their initial iteration and to what they have seen produced by their peers.

Spatial Design Exercise 1: In your Hands, 2017

**Table 2: Selection of 2017 student work from In your Hands – Iterations 1 and 2.
Photographs by authors**

Iteration 1	Iteration 2
	
	





Exercise 2: Self-Portrait

Following *In your Hands*, *Self-Portrait* re-introduces the medium of wire to students with an exercise requesting the design and construction of a three-dimensional, to-scale self-portrait.

Having reflected on the previous exercise and their own identities, students are requested to design and make a three-dimensional self-portrait using wire to convey their outer and inner selves. The portrait requires self-reflection, celebrates the individuality of the designer and asks the students to portray themselves in the process of the design and making of a three-dimensional portrait that is recognisable. The brief has deliberate room for interpretation by the student, allowing them to formulate their own understanding of their identity, and discovering a way in which to tangibly represent this using the forgiving medium of wire (Botes 2012, p. 133).

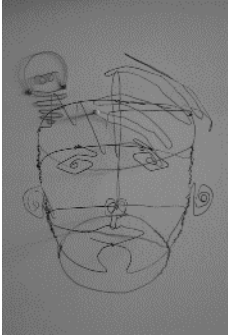
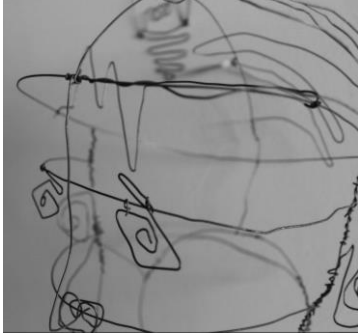
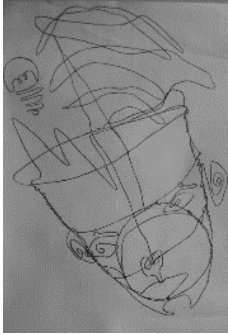

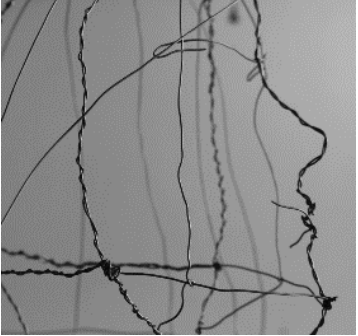
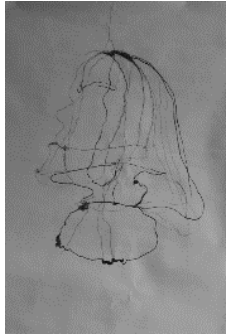
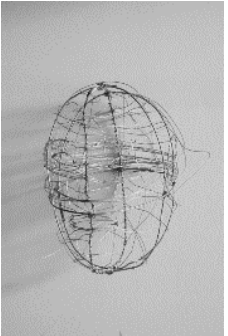
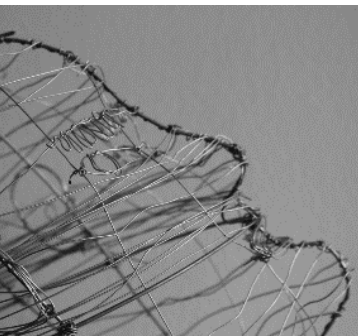
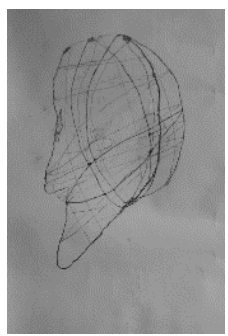
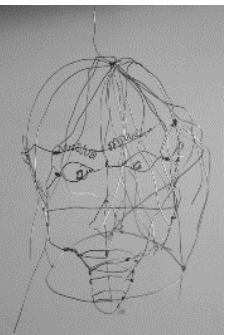

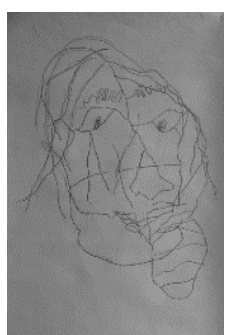
The result of the exercise is some one-hundred self-portraits suspended alongside each other in a gallery venue, with, at completion, the student alongside his or her portrait. The exhibition enhances the collective identity of the first-year students as a community, encouraging interaction under the pretext of a project that requires students to communicate something of their own identities. It generates peer to peer conversations, but also allows for each student's unique self to be acknowledged and valued by their peers and educators.

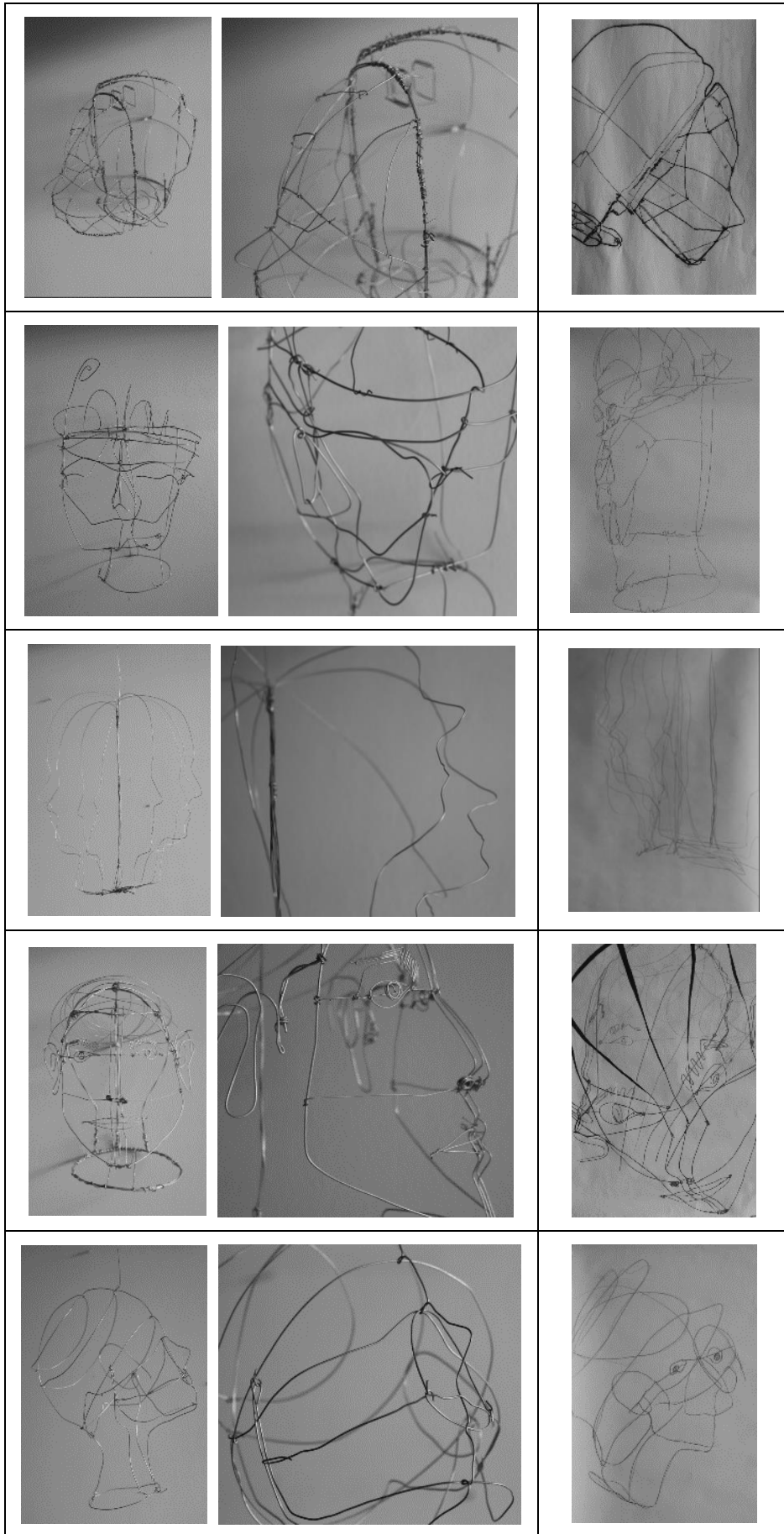
Saidi & Nazier (2011, pp. 187-8) see diversity in student backgrounds as an opportunity to broaden the perspectives of all students by responding democratically to the known and unknown contexts of design students through curriculum design. By relating the self-portrait exercise to the context of the student's self, the first-year commences with what he or she already knows. An opportunity is provided to each student to portray their own self-understanding through a predefined medium. Not only does the exercise embrace the student's self-knowledge, it also places value on their individual input and does this in the context of a group exhibition among the work of their peer community. The role of discourse sparked by the exercise is key to the development of design thinking (Le Roux 2006, p. 98) and promotes an environment which speaks of the concept of communalism (Higgs 2011, p. 42).

The two-dimensional shadow projection of the self-portrait, as the second part of the exercise, requires an iteration of the wire exercise. The reversal of the typical design process – making a three-dimensional product before its two-dimensional representation – initiates the students' understanding of spatial engagement and design as a three-dimensional product for which drawings are a means of representation. The request to display qualities of the portrait from different vantage points offer students an iterative opportunity to develop the narrative of their self-portraits through drawing while remaining true to the projected shadows of the three-dimensional portrait. An opportunity to reflect on the impact of qualities of light, shadow and angle projections all restate the significance of communicating the emotive qualities of space, beyond merely projecting a drawing from which products may be replicated. As with *In your Hands*, *Self-Portrait* challenges the prior knowledge students may have in visual literacy with an alternative medium, reversing the conventional process of design and emphasizing the importance of process in spatial design thinking.

Spatial Design Exercise 2: Self-Portrait, 2017

Table 3: Selection of 2017 student work from Self-Portrait – Iterations 1 and 2. Photographs by authors

Iteration 1 – Wire Portrait		Iteration 2 – Drawing
		
		
		
		



Conclusion

Two exercises, In your Hands and Self-Portrait, introduced the spatial design student to the concept of self-reflection and representation as ways of combining one's identity into the design process. The recognition of the value of individuality and identity of the student in a creative discipline validates each individual student as no single outcome is expected from the entire group of first-year students in these exercises. The value of the student group as a community is reflected in the opportunities for group discussion, group exhibitions and working alongside each other in the studio environment, aspects which are woven into the spatial design exercises. As individuals, students are asked to reflect on their own thoughts, identities, images and frames of reference to explore the making of a product which reveals their identities to their community of peers. The medium of stone and wire reduces the effects that prior visual literacy, through experience with typical artistic media and two-dimensional drawing, may have on the product of spatial design by reinforcing the requirement of self-reflection and iteration and highlighting the prominence of process in design thinking. The use of the students' individual knowledge contexts as informants to the exercises enables all students to approach the exercise, regardless of prior experience in visual literacy. These exercises require students with prior visual literacy to review their knowledge bases by introducing them to concepts of critical reflection while allowing those with minimal training in visual literacy to overcome the jump to design thinking by emphasizing the importance of process in design through self-reflection and iteration. The introduction of alternative media allow students to approach the exercise on an even playing field for which prior experience in working with wire, pliers and stone may have been unlikely. The reflection of self in the Self-Portrait exercise validates the individuality of the student and their identity as a critical factor in informing their own output. The iteration of the self-portrait as a reflection on to a two-dimensional surface (using graphite and paper) introduces students to the key mode of communication in spatial design education – the drawing as a representation of a three-dimensional spatial product without favouring the aptitude for precision from the EGD student or the expert control of media from the Visual Arts student. The process is about reflection and iteration, then representation.

Acknowledgments

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