# #Decolonise!

**Design educators reflecting on the call for the decolonisation of education**

## Reinventing design teaching in an era of exponential growth

**Ilse Prinsloo**
*University of Johannesburg*

## Abstract

Students across the globe are demanding a change in education. In South Africa, the call is for 'decolonisation' of higher education. Initially, the call was for free higher education, but students then demanded a significant overhaul of higher education; from the removal of symbols celebrating white supremacy, to a change in the selection criteria and policies to promote applicants on more indicators than academic aptitude alone.

Student protests against the governance and structure of higher education have been familiar occurrences in other parts of the world as well. In 2015, students in the Netherlands protested for a "new university", that include democratisation of governance, financial transparency and better conditions for temporary staff. In Brazil, student protests against neoliberal educational reforms, lead to the occupation of more than 1000 schools and universities in 2016. In the past five years, similar protests resonated from Chile (2010-13) and Canada (2010-13).

Given that education hasn't changed much in decades, we should not be surprised by the reaction from students. We live in an era where people are surrounded by millions of everything, where anything and everything is available, anywhere, all the time, with all possibilities and combinations and at affordable prices. Technology is a reality in everyday life. Yet, we educate our youth for jobs that do not yet exist, where they will have to face challenges that we are not even aware of yet. We are trying to solve 21st-century challenges with a 20th-century education model. As educators, we should consider how we want to reinvent higher education during a time when billions of people have access to universal knowledge - more than ever before in the history of humankind.

At a glance, the demands made by students across the globe are similar in that they are concerned about the governance of higher education, access to higher education, including the cost thereof, and the cultural relevance of education at their institutions. By means of comparative research methodology, this paper will establish common themes in the demands relating to education that were made during student protests that took place over the period of five years, across the globe. Reflecting on these themes, the paper will propose an approach to design education that promote cultural values that motivate our discipline to be optimistic and to persevere in this era of exponential technological growth.

**Keywords**:

*Decolonisation, design education, academic literacies, education in exponential era*

## Introduction

Knowledge creation is not a western concept that developed with the university model of the 19th century (Connell 2014, p.1). To gather information, study it and make sense of it, is a way we solve daily challenges. Producing creative knowledge, therefore, is a natural response to the immediate environment that we encounter. Yet, universities developed models that guided studies and established research methods that were required for the needs of the time; and embedded in it, the culture derived from the 19th century. Then again, other methods to study material and formulate abstract theories already existed. History confirms that knowledge such as the numbering system, algebra and trigonometry existing long before universities were established (Connell 2016, p.2).

## Student protests globally

Africa prides itself with one of the first universities in the world. For most of its 1,000-year history, Egypt's al-Azhar University has acted independently and is still organised in its original Islamic model. It is the only university in the world of its kind to survive as a modern university. The rest of the academic traditions in Africa have vanished. Academic institutions that remain in Africa are all organised to the European models, like in the rest of the world (Altbach 2001; Lulat 2003). However, being the oldest African University hasn't exempted al-Azhar University from student protests. Despite all its efforts to maintain the original academic structure, all while keeping up with the changes in the modern society they serve, the university has had to deal with countless protests over the years. According to Osama al-Hatimi, a specialist in student movements, student groups have been opposing the administration's wishes ever since the 1930's and student movements "were the thermometer used to measure Egyptian society and its ambitions" (al-Hatimi in Suleiman 2014, n.p.).

Student protests against the governance and structure of higher education have been familiar occurrences worldwide. Media reports confirm a significant increase in the number of student protests across the globe since the turn of the 21st century. These include protests in Chile (2010-13), Canada (2010-13), the Netherlands (2015), Brazil and South Africa (2016), to name the publicised protests that took place in the past five years. Table 1 shows the comparison in the demands from students across the globe, who protested against the state of affairs in higher education over a period 2013 to 2017. Upon reflection, when the demands of protesting students are analysed, some common themes come to light. Although students globally protest for, or against many different causes that include environmental and political causes, this paper will reflect on the protests in respect of higher education only.

The results of the comparative study correspond with Sociology Professor, Rachel Brooks, who states that "…student protests of the 21st century have much in common" (Brooks 2016, n.p.). She maintains that many of the protests concerning higher education are opposing the introduction, or increase, of tuition fees, as well as concerns about the change in the position of higher education for private gain, rather than a public benefit. When comparing the demands from the students' protests over the past five years, across both first world and developing economies, it appears that there is a common themes that emerge.  Table 1 indicates the themes that develop, namely accessibility to higher education and the governance of higher educational institutions.

Brooks (2016) furthermore highlights how technology, especially with regard to social media, expanded and diversified how news is spread and how protests gain momentum. Technology changed how protests are executed and since technology has no geographical boundaries, it facilitates communication between student activists across national borders.  For instance, South African students using Twitter hashtags #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall managed

to stir up protests across the African continent (Brooks 2016). In addition, software, like Sukey and FireChat, were developed with the aim of improving communications between participating students during protests.

**Table 1 Comparison of demands from student protests relating to education 2013 - 2017**

| Country | Slogan/Emblem | Theme: Accessibility | Theme: Governance |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Canada** **(2010 – 2013)** **(2016)** | Red Square *Symbol for Collective for Quebec without poverty* The protests in 2012 are referred to as Maple Spring | Oppose government cuts in public spending, like education Oppose the increase of fees Demand free tuition (2016) | Demand right to education for everyone (2016) Oppose government's budget cuts on education |
| **Chile** **(2010 – 2013)** **(2017)** | Advancing towards free public education without debt | Oppose students portion of 75% of costs of education Oppose escalation of cost of education that is 87% from 2005 to 2012 Oppose a system that favours those who can pay | Oppose a system that favours those who can pay |
| **Netherlands** **(2015)** | New University | Oppose the cancellation of courses without consultation with students | Demand the democratisation of governance of universities Demand better condition of employment for temporary staff Demand transparency in finances of universities Oppose risky property speculation by universities Demand restructuring of departments must be done in consultation with students |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Brazil** (2013) (2016) | The FIFA Standard | Oppose cut back on government spending on education<br><br>Demand a 10% of GDP for education | Oppose neo-liberal educational reforms<br><br>Demand the denouncement of ideological harassment by professors |
| **South Africa** (2016) | Decolonisation | Demand a moratorium on fee increases while testing the possibility of free education<br><br>Demand the cancellation of existing student debt<br><br>Demand an increase government funding to 50% | Demand the implementation of an institutional transformation charter<br><br>Oppose the Eurocentric education system<br><br>Demand review of institutional autonomy |

## Decolonisation

South African students compiled lists of demands during the #FeesMustFall campaign of 2016 that resulted in protests across South Africa. Student leaders from 10 higher education instructions, namely the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), University of Johannesburg (UJ), University of Pretoria (UP), University of Cape Town (UCT), Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT), University of the Western Cape (UWC), Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU), Rhodes University (Rhodes), Durban University of Technology (DUT) and University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) presented the demands to their respective universities. The South African Students Congress (SASCO) also presented a list of 10 demands to the South African government's task team. Only UWC and NMMU did not demand the decolonisation of higher education, although UWC did demand the Africanisation of the curriculum to meet industry standards (What Are Students… 2017).

When Jenni Evans, a News24 correspondent, asked the UCT student, Athabile Nonxuba, to explain what students meant by decolonised education, he told her that the current curriculum dehumanises black students. "We study all these dead white men who presided over our oppression, and we are made to use their thinking as a standard and as a point of departure" (Nonxuba in Evans 2016, n.p.). He further stated that African thinking has been undermined and that students must have access to their "own education from our own continent" (Nonxuba in Evans 2016, n.p.). He used the example that students are exposed to Eurocentric philosophers' opinions as a standard, instead of introducing concepts by Africans.

During this interview, Nonxubu said that decolonisation of education will develop African interests and resolve African economies, cultural and social issues. He also pointed out that education can't be decolonised by the white people who colonised Africa and that decolonised education has to be defined by the people it serves. ''We want to review that system and that curriculum, and that can't happen without a decolonised institution'' (Nonxuba in Evans 2016).

When reflecting on the statements of Brooks (2016) on the similarities in the student protests in higher education, it is evident that the fundamental demands to decolonise higher education echoes global concerns. When the explanation of decolonisation is read by removing racist (political) comments, then the demands seem very similar to other students across the globe. South African students oppose the existence of, and the increase of tuition fees, because it excludes members of the public from higher education. They also believe that higher education is meant to benefit the public, rather than be used for private gain, and as such want to be part of the governance of higher education that is meant to serve the public (Here are 10 demands… 2016; What Are Students… 2017).

## Disillusioned youth globally

The demand for 'decolonisation' of higher education in South Africa is a symptom of disillusioned youth in South Africa, just as the protests are in other parts of the world. Researchers are seeing patterns of student detachment and new forms of engagement to which institutions have not adapted (McInnes 2001). The student protests at various universities show that there is a new generation of young people who no longer feel that current leadership represents their aspirations. In South Africa, students are demonstrating signs of detachment by extremist groups that have no interest in preserving the current political and economic order (Pitso 2016). Conversely, there are also groups of students aspiring to contribute to South Africa's "new economic and political dispensation" (Pitso 2016, n.p.), but who feel ignored and will remain excluded. They are conflicted by a sense of loyalty to the government that freed the country from Apartheid, while at the same time being angry with the same government who has not delivered on promises, policies and services they made (Pitso 2016).

The ideology of a collective freedom seems to have shifted to individuality and material wealth. Media shows politicians and their families being enriched through government tenders, state-owned corporations or the government's interactions with the private sector (Pitso 2016). They report on corruption within the government and the case of state capture by wealthy families and corporations has only exacerbated the feelings of disappointment and hopelessness, resulting in disillusionment.

### An era of exponential technological growth

Exponential technological advancements have dominated the 21st century. We are part of a generation that has witnessed outstanding innovations in information technology. As such, we have a digitally native generation of students that is constructing their online digital life (Prensky 2007). Advancements have been made in all spheres of life. We are surrounded by millions of everything, where anything and everything is available, anywhere, all the time, with all possibilities and combinations and at affordable prices. Technology is a reality in everyday life. Yet, we educate our youth for jobs that do not yet exist, where they will have to face challenges that we are not even aware of yet.

Where the 20th century's industrial model used machines to create increasing returns to technological advancements, the current digital model uses a system of effects that create an accelerating scale of development (Kurzweil 2013). The vital dissimilarity is that industrial models are linear while digital models are exponential. That means that in contrast to a linear model where the same increases are made at regular intervals by adding a value to the previous value, exponential models multiply the values at regular intervals (Figure 1). The result is that the growth patterns, as shown in the graph in figure 1 below, is very different. Linear growth is incremental, that is 10% better, but exponential growth expects 10X better results. Smart phones and social media, artificial intelligence (AI), autonomous cars, three-

dimensional printing, health and longevity, and education have all undergone developments the era of exponential growth.

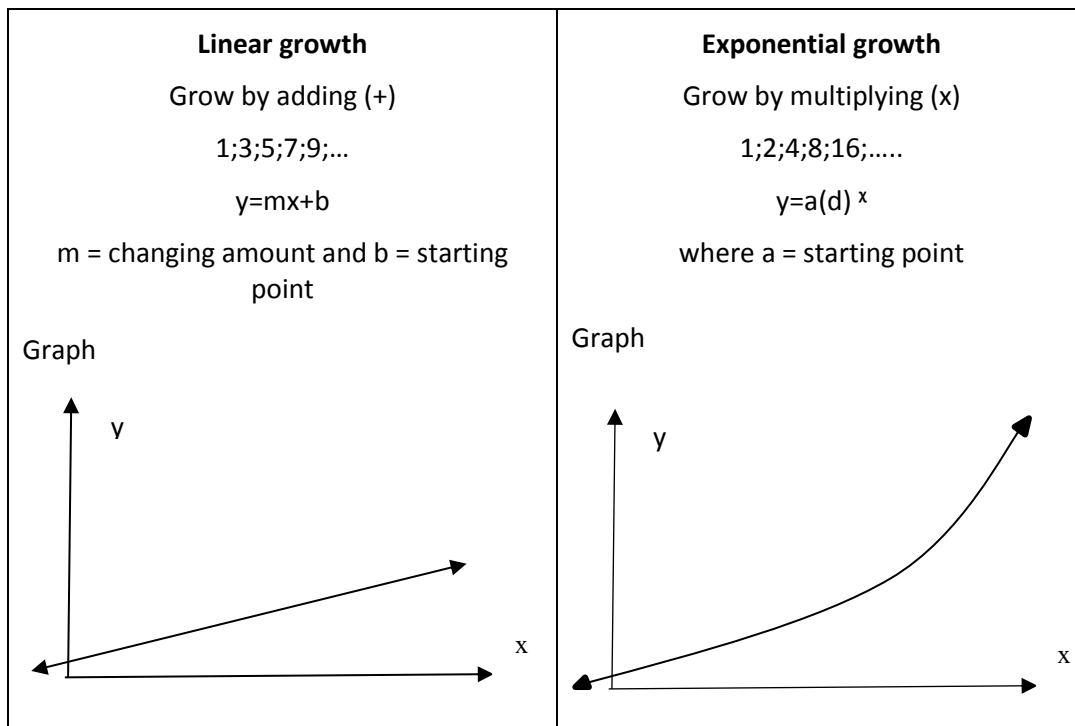| Linear growth | Exponential growth |
|---|---|
| Grow by adding (+) | Grow by multiplying (x) |
| 1;3;5;7;9;… | 1;2;4;8;16;….. |
| $y=mx+b$ | $y=a(d)^x$ |
| m = changing amount and b = starting point | where a = starting point |
| Graph | Graph |

Figure 1 Difference between linear and exponential growth

The development of technology has had significant consequences on education. With smart phones becoming easier to own, access to world class education is in the owner's hands. Overall, students are adapting to the use of technology at a much faster rate than their teachers. Moreover, when students observe a lack of digital proficiency of teachers, they regard them as 'illiterate' in the one area that students regard as essential for their future, namely technology (Prensky 2007). As a result, the notion of what education should be, is changing. When students have access to self-directed learning on digital platforms on topics that fascinate and interest them, they see how it is different to the current learning models where they have no choice in what they learn and where they are subjected to "test you to death" (Prensky 2007, p. 40) methods of learning.

**Literacies in an exponential era**

Literacies and discourses are always positioned in social contexts. Academic literacies are no different. Design students, for instance, are required to develop academic literacies that are entrenched in the culture and social context of universities. So when Gee (2012, p. 3) describes 'Discourses' as more than language, and as "… ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking and often reading and writing…", then the values that students bring to their studies are integral to the propositions that they make. This is especially true for students of design.

The autonomous model of literacy, as it was termed by Street (1984), doesn't acknowledge students' contextual positions and the literacies that their cultures and histories can add to discourses (Boughey & McKenna 2016). Instead, the autonomous model considers literacy as "independent of and impartial towards trends and struggles in everyday life" (Street, 1984, p.28). And while the ideological model regards literacy as "an active relationship or a

way of orienting to the social and cultural world" (Lankshear & Knobel, 2008, n.p..), the culturally responsive model promotes multiple literacies that are "specifically designed to perpetuate and enrich the culture of a people and equip them with the tools to become functional participants in society" (Gay, 2010, p.35).

In this era of exponential growth, with the many cultures and social contexts that communicate globally with the use of technology, it will be reasonable to agree that students will benefit most from a culturally responsive model. For instance, students that don't have English as a first language can then bring additional perspectives to a discourse when they engage with existing academic literacies. Bringing student readers' social contexts to the discourse can add another view on topics and current views. Canagarajah (1999) expresses it as "… non-native students can go beyond the reproductive and deterministic influences of the English language and its discourses to display a measure of agency as they critically negotiate discourses in the light of their preferred ideologies and rhetorical traditions" (Canagarajah 1999, p. 170).

In our South African context, especially, with the disparity that exists in basic education and the diversity of cultures and social contexts, design students should be encouraged to approach resources with their own personal experiences as the starting point before they attempt to make meaning or participate in the discourses. Only once they understand their own perspective, can students be persuaded to interpret the contextual background and values that inform the social practices and related texts that they found in their selected resources. With further encouragement, students will then succeed to construct their own practices, based on new knowledge that is positioned in the same or new contexts.

In addition, multimodal literacy, as described by Jewitt and Kress (2003) as the design of a discourse through the use of semiotics, can, by integration with other modes of expression, create a comprehensible 'language' that assists in expressing meanings. A typical example will be a web page that has sound effects, oral language, written language, music, images and video combined to bring across a message. The combinations in multimodal literacies instil analysis skills on a student through repetition of knowledge and also have the feature of making students sensitive to recognising multimodal discourse in written works. Thus, multimodal literacy utilises semiotic resources and modalities in making meaning of knowledge (Lim 2011).

In a generation where young people are connected globally through multiple forms of media, the value of multimodal literacies has to be addressed as an access point to understanding the literacies and discourses positioned in the social contexts of our students. Students often use multimodal literacy to communicate meaning. As we are "… moving away from the word-centered era of print literacy, we are now entering a new era of multimodality in which written text is increasingly interconnected with visual, audio and other modes of meaning" (Cope & Kalantzis 2006, p. 42).

Technology that uses the combination of communication techniques such as text, sound, language, spatial and visual compositions is the way people, especially students, communicate today. Multimodal tools are often tied to social networks, and people are subjected to these on a daily basis. Multimodality can, therefore, trigger a sense of personal authority by making knowledge more accessible to anyone who is willing to look for it. As academics in the design disciplines, the value of multimodal literacies will continually be a method of communication across social contexts and certainly a sure way to start discourses on any available platform.

As students, globally, communicate and engage in dialogue through multiple forms of 'language', the gap between lecturers and students can become bigger. However, through greater understanding of a student's personal experiences as the starting point of the

learning process, lecturers can encourage students to construct new practices based on new knowledge that is positioned new contexts.

This paper, therefore, proposes that design educators look to the future, rather than the past, to address the challenges that higher education currently faces. The next generation of designers will have to skillfully drive innovation and adapt to change in a quicker and more effective manner than ever before. Future jobs will expect creative thinking in order to set us apart from the fast-developing artificial intelligence. As design educators, we have influence in the way we prepare design students for the future. Addressing challenges through literacy models that embrace cultural values and social contexts, can develop young adults to innovatively meet the needs of the 21st century.

## Conclusion

Student protests against the governance and structure of higher education have been familiar occurrences worldwide. A comparison of the demands that were made by student protests from five countries over the past five years indicates that similarities exist in the concerns over the state of higher education globally. The fundamental demands to decolonise higher education in South Africa echoes concerns of students globally. Students demand access to higher education institutions, regardless of their financial position, and feel that governance of those same institutions must promote education for the public, rather than function for individuality and material wealth. These student protests are symptoms of a renewed youth who feel that current leadership doesn't represent their ambitions and desires. The South African youth, in making their demand for a decolonised education, is no different.

The 21st century has witnessed exponential advancement in technology resulting in a digitally native generation of students that put together their online digital life. The value of these literacies, that connect young people across the globe, has to be addressed as an access point to understanding the discourses that are situated in the social contexts of our students. As students communicate their personal experiences of the learning process, lecturers should encourage them to construct new practices based on knowledge that is positioned new contexts.

The future of humankind seems to follow a predictable trajectory that is determined by structural drivers that include educational development. As design educators, we are tasked to continually develop the what, when and how of design education in the 21st century by reinventing design teaching in an era of exponential growth. By engaging in this restructure, we can contribute to young adults in forming mental 'operating systems' that will determine their effectiveness in everything that they do in our fast-changing future.

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