

# DESIGN THINKING, NEOLIBERALISM, AND THE TRIVIALISATION OF SOCIAL CHANGE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

**Robyn Cook**

Department of Communication Design, Falmouth University

## Abstract

Whilst the notion of Design Thinking is nothing new, the methodology, and its focus on innovation, has become increasingly popularised within higher education over the last decade. Along with related practices, including Service Design, Design for Social Change, Social Design, and Design for Social Innovation, Design Thinking advocates a strategic, human-centred approach to design which ostensibly provides a “tool to address some of [societies’] most pressing issues: alleviating poverty, providing better education, and improving basic health services for all human beings” (Sharma 2012:195). Using examples from the RSA Student Design Awards, this chapter examines various ideological and practical problems inherent within the methodology. These include Design Thinking’s proximity to neoliberal economic policy, and a concomitant emphasis on ‘social change’ through marketisation and responsabilisation; its injudicious borrowing of techniques associated with the social sciences; and concerns around positioning vulnerable communities as ‘opportunities’ for gaining creative or mercantile capital, under the mantle of effecting positive ‘social change’. The chapter concludes by sketching out a possible way forward for developing a more critical and situated form of the practice, to ensure that the current rhetorical hyperbolisation around Design Thinking as a panacea for our global crises is balanced with an understanding that it is not an inherently emancipatory practice, but rather, one that has the potential to do more harm than good.

Over the last decade, the global field of Communication Design, and design education in particular, has become increasingly preoccupied with the notion of 'Design Thinking'. Whilst the origins of the term can be tracked back to an art and design research discourse, with (inter alia) Nigel Cross' *Designerly Ways of Knowing* (1982) and Richard Buchanan's *Wicked Problems in Design Thinking* (1992), 'Design Thinking' has since been co-opted and largely re-defined within contemporary business practice and the field of management science. Consultancy firm IDEO, and Stanford's Hasso Plattner Institute of Design (commonly known as the d-school), in particular, have been at the forefront of promoting 'designerly' ways of thinking as an organisational resource for strategic problem solving and innovation (see Kimbell 2015). Within this context, Design Thinking has been defined variously (and often indistinctly) as: "a repeatable, human-centered method for creative problem solving"; an "umbrella term that catches multi-disciplinary, human-centered projects that involve research and rapid ideation"; and "a human-centered approach to innovation that draws from the designer's toolkit to integrate the needs of people, the possibilities of technology, and the requirements for business success"; to name but a few (Thomsen 2013:[sp]; Szczepanska 2017:[sp]; Brown 2018:[sp]).

While the etymological and definitional ambiguity of 'Design Thinking' has been addressed in the literature elsewhere (see, for example, Dalsgaard 2014; and Kimbell 2015) what is shared by its more recent, popularised characterisation is that 'design' is no longer understood as a process preoccupied with form and/or content, but rather a human-centred problem-solving activity able to, according to its advocates, tackle 'real-world' issues, from healthcare to access to clean water (Brown & Wyatt cited in Kimbell 2015:297).

In turn, traditional fields of design, and design education, wrestling with the democratisation of design – where you can buy an algorithmically generated logo online for as little as R40,00 – have begun *re-appropriating* the new innovation-management sense of Design Thinking as a means of diversifying their own field (Fleischmann 2015:101). Creative agencies are increasingly expanding into Design Thinking consultancy work (for example the launch of OgilvyRed in 2016), with new design practices focused on Design Thinking as 'social innovation' (including Service Design, Design for Social Change, Social Design, and Design for Social Innovation) becoming increasingly mainstream in the creative industries and education sectors.

The Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce, more commonly known as the RSA, runs an annual competition called the Student Design Awards (SDA), which provides an example of the trajectory outlined above. Specifically, the awards, which began as a celebration of craft-based technical excellence in design, currently frame themselves as "a global curriculum and competition that challenges emerging designers to tackle real-world social, economic and environmental issues through design thinking" (RSA 2015:9). Design briefs for 2017-2018 include: designing a vision and business case to promote greater wellbeing at work in order to contribute to higher productivity and better overall mental health; designing a product, service, or system to encourage and/or enable better sleep, again leading to improved productivity and better overall mental health; and designing or redesigning a way for people who are financially excluded to be better served by banks and other money management services (RSA SDA 2017:5,7,11).

The RSA SDA briefs also evidence Design Thinking's strategic priorities: feasibility, viability, and desirability (see Fig. 1). Feasibility, according to Design Thinking, relates to the *how* of design, the applied practicality of the proposed solution, and whether it can be distributed and/or implemented effectively (Castillo, Diehl & Brezet 2012:6; Dam & Siang 2018:[sp]). Viability refers to a project's commercial prospects, its sources of revenue, its value proposition, and its ability to be financially self-sustaining (Dam & Siang 2018:[sp]). Lastly, desirability indicates a project's capacity for satisfying user-needs, as well as its cachet within the marketplace (Dam & Siang 2018:[sp]).

Correspondingly, the RSA SDA judging criteria require that the proposed service, product, or system is technically and technologically workable rather than being, for example, critical, speculative or adversarial (RSA SDA 2017:22). The briefs also emphasise the need for "commercial awareness" and that proposed projects should "make sense from a financial point of view" (RSA SDA 2017:22). Finally, each project needs to fulfil a human need (user-centred), with an awareness of the broader competitive environment in mind (RSA SDA 2017:22).

At the intersection of these three elements, again according to Design Thinking principles, lies 'innovation' (see Fig. 1): the so-called 'sweet spot' for developing new, implementable services, products, or systems (IDEO U 2017:[sp]; Barrett 2016:5). It is within innovation that designers will ostensibly find solutions to large-scale complex and systemic issues relevant to society, businesses and governments (RSA 2015:9). As the RSA SDA (2017:1) note:

We now face serious, unprecedented and complex global challenges that require creativity, collaboration and cooperation more than ever before; unleashing the creative potential and innovation of the next generation will be crucial to tackling these wicked problems.

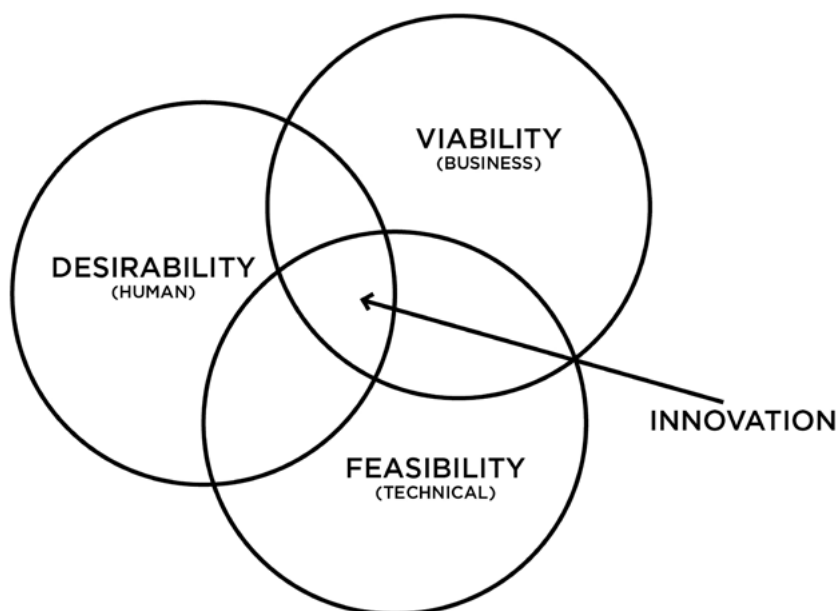


Figure 1. of Design Thinking's strategic priorities (Brown [sa]:[sp]).

'Innovation' appears to provide an ideal balance between addressing pressing social, environmental and political issues, encouraging on-going market-liberalisation (productivity, profitability, entrepreneurship) and the need for diversification within the field of design. This helps to make sense of the rapid, almost zealous, popularisation of Design Thinking (along with its social innovation derivatives) within design and higher education globally. Alongside the RSA SDA briefs, examples include the launch of Parson's DESIS (Design for Social Innovation and Sustainability) Lab in 2009, to "explore the relationship between design and social change" and "to advance the practice and discourse of design-led social innovation" (The New School [Sa]). The DESIS network now includes 'labs' at the University of Botswana (Botswana), the University of Johannesburg (South Africa), Auckland University (New Zealand), the University of Lapland (Finland), Universidad del Norte (Colombia), and Tokyo Zokei University (Japan), to name but a few (DESIS Network 2018:[sp]). In 2011 global design and advertising student and industry competition, D&AD, launched its White Pencil Award to encourage "harnessing the power of creativity to make a real difference in the world around us" (O'Kennedy 2011:[sp]). In 2015, the Hasso Plattner Institute of Design Thinking launched a new 'd-school' at the University of Cape Town. The launch of the school in South Africa is intended to act as a "locus of the d-school's work" on the African continent where "the context is complex and evolving, [and where] inequity and social, economic, political and cultural diversity collide with opportunity" resulting in a call for "ongoing innovation in the form of new solutions and outcomes, as well as new applications for existing solutions" (d-school 2017:[sp]). Also in 2015, Paris College of Art (PCA) launched its Master of Arts in Design for Social Impact, seeking to "equip citizen designers with the practical know-how (design thinking methods, leadership and entrepreneurial skills) to successfully lead design projects that will bring positive societal changes" (PCA 2018:[sp]). In 2016 Ravensbourne University launched their MDes Social Innovation which uses the "lens of design thinking" to "develop solutions that address pressing social and environmental demands ... often in the fields of health, social cohesion, demographic shifts, climate change and economic development" (Ravensbourne 2017:[sp]). And in 2018 Edinburgh College of Art will launch their MA Degree in Design For Change, which seeks to "address complex, global challenges such as disruptive technologies, ageing populations, economic instability, conflict and displacement and environmental degradation through design-led interventions" (Edinburgh College of Art 2017:[sp]).

Along with these kinds of focused programmes, Design Thinking has also become embedded within higher education more generally. For example, in a South African context, Design Thinking currently informs a wide range of art and design higher education modules, including those of Architecture, Graphic Design and Industrial Design at the University of Johannesburg; Architecture at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits); and Visual Communication Design at Stellenbosch University.

While the examples outlined above are by no means comprehensive, they are helpful in evidencing the kind of ambitious rhetoric around Design Thinking within higher education. Indeed, given that the approach is currently touted as "an answer to challenges facing organizations wanting to innovate but also societies grappling with complex public issues", it is unsurprising that Design Thinking has been pitched as a silver bullet for contemporary crises (Johansson-Sköldberg, Woodilla & Çetinkaya 2013:121; RSA 2015:10).

However, somewhere between designing as thinking, thinking as designing, and designing

as thinking as designing, and the concomitant pedagogic and administrative push for innovation, the sense of what Design Thinking means for designers (students, educators and practitioners) has become somewhat murky. The very notion of design practice, and the production of yet more goods and services, is at odds with a sustainability agenda. However, what is perhaps most lacking is an in-depth criticality and situatedness around Design as Design Thinking; its ends ('real-world' change); its ideological underpinnings; and who ultimately benefits from its 'social innovation'. This is of acute importance within a South African higher education context currently attending to urgent calls for the decolonisation and transformation of its structures and curricula. Indeed, for such a counter-hegemonic project to take place, there needs to be a clear understanding of the 'hidden curriculum' within Design Thinking to ensure that design educators are not complicit advocates for, or mouthpieces of, systems that reproduce social inequalities under the guise of 'social good'.

In the following sections I attempt to draw out some of these issues as a means of introducing a much-needed criticality around the practice of Design Thinking. Firstly, I examine its inextricable link to neoliberalism. Specifically, I argue that Design Thinking is fundamentally underpinned by corporate solutionism; offering short-term, and oftentimes glib, 'coping' mechanisms to social issues, rather than challenging their root cause in any enduring way. Moreover, I contend that by employing this approach, Design Thinking problematically shifts the onus of responsibility away from the state and/or society at large to the at-risk communities themselves.

Secondly, I explore how, in dealing with 'real-world' issues, Design Thinking necessitates the use of techniques traditionally associated with the social sciences, including interviews, participant observation studies and action research. However, while the social sciences prioritise professional and pedagogical directives around issues of transparency, accountability, confidentiality, professionalism, ethics, non-maleficence, and so on, Design Thinking has no such framework. As such, there is no safeguarding in place for either the design students or the 'participants' involved – leaving both parties vulnerable to exploitation.

Finally, I argue that with student design award bodies (such as D&AD White Pencil, and RSA SDA) and higher education institutions increasingly promoting the "power of creativity to stimulate positive change" (D&AD 2018:[sp]), Design-Thinking-led programmes run the risk of encouraging a kind of 'volunteer tourism', whereby students (and their affiliated Institutions) gain creative capital and notoriety off the backs of vulnerable communities, with no real sense of the benefit to, or impact on, the communities themselves.

## ii

The view of design as a tool for social change is nothing new. From Victor Papanek's *Design for the Real World* (1971), to Sim Van der Ryn and Stuart Cowan's *Ecological Design* (1995), to Carl DiSalvo's *Adversarial Design* (2012), designers have previously argued for the possibility of social change through design. However, unlike the aforementioned texts which acknowledge design as an inherently political activity, Design Thinking takes an ostensibly depoliticised worldview; seeking only to address issues of the here and now, or the day to day (see Kimbell 2011). In other words, it assumes a *reactive* rather than pre-emptive approach to social change. In turn, Design

Thinking positions itself as non-partisan; attempting to sidestep the complex ethical, moral, and political debates occupying traditional critical design discourse. As IDEO's Tim Brown and Barry Katz (2011:382) note in their popular essay *Change by Design*:

In contrast to our academic colleagues, we are not trying to generate new knowledge, test a theory, or validate a scientific hypothesis. The mission of design thinking is to translate observations into insights, and insights into the products and services that will improve lives.

Given that Design Thinking, in its current form, has been pushed by a business management framework, it is perhaps self-evident that it would prioritise the development of products and services over and above the socio-political reflections and considerations of academia. However, with Design Thinking being sold as a “tool to address some of [societies'] most pressing issues: alleviating poverty, providing better education, and improving basic health services for all human beings” (Sharma 2012:195), there is a rhetorical sleight of hand at play.

Indeed, from a broader global economic policy perspective, innovation is seen as a core driver of economic growth and structural reform by various economic organisations including the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and BRICS, the emerging economies of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (OECD 2015:[sp]; IMF 2016:11; BRICS 2017:[sp]). The OECD *Innovation Strategy* (2015:[sp]) states, for instance:

The world today faces significant economic, environmental and social challenges. While no single policy instrument holds all the answers, innovation is the key ingredient of any effort to improve people's quality of life. Today's recovery from the global financial and economic crisis remains fragile. As countries seek to improve productivity performance and ensure sustained growth, they will need to boost their capacity to innovate. Innovation is also essential for addressing some of society's most pressing issues, such as climate change, health and poverty.

While the 2017 BRICS *Action Plan for Innovation Cooperation* (2017:1) notes:

Innovation is one of the key driving forces of global sustainable development, playing a fundamental role in promoting economic growth, supporting job creation, entrepreneurship and structural reform, enhancing productivity and competitiveness, providing better services for the citizens and addressing global challenges. The BRICS countries aim to encourage innovation through practical actions to promote sustainable economic growth today and lay a solid foundation for tomorrow.

Thus, rather than being a neutral or value-free proposition, Design Thinking, and the widespread uptake thereof, is largely *due* to its proximity to prevailing neoliberal political agendas (see Brown 2013). Perhaps the most overt way this manifests in the context of Design Thinking, is the overriding emphasis on market logic and market values. Whether this is explicit, as with IDEO's corporate consultancy work, or less so, with the implementation of social innovation partnerships

between businesses and government, Design Thinking positions every sphere of society in terms of its potential marketability (feasibility, viability), against prevailing laws of supply and demand (desirability). That this is perhaps no longer perceived as ideological, but part of a common-sense attitude towards 'the everyday', is, as theorist Slavoj Žižek (xiii:2006) notes, ideology at its purest and most effective.

Returning to the RSA SDA briefs, the ontological impact of this agenda is clearly evident, most overtly, in that the briefs are underwritten by, and developed with, corporate partners. The 2017-2018 sponsors include NatWest, Phillips, Natracare, NCR Corporation, and AEG (RSA SDA 2017:1). While there is already an inherent conflict of interest in the corporate sponsorship of student competitions (see, for example, Grant & Davis 2008), what is particular to the RSA SDA briefs is the pervasive normalisation of economic rationality as a strategy for social change. Specifically, transnational corporations, seemingly as a matter of course, are identifying areas for 'social improvement' and are doing so with an economic interest in mind.

The 'Hygienic Home' brief, for example, asks students to "design or re-design a floor cleaning product that will make cleaning easier and more effective, enabling older people to maintain their independence for longer" (RSA SDA 2017:11). However, this approach to 'elderly care' is not the value-free or 'good news' proposition it purports to be. This brief is sponsored by Eureka, a subsidiary of the world's largest appliance manufacturers, the Midea Group, who reported an annual turnover in 2017 of US\$28 billion (Midea launched with ... 2017:[sp]). Given that ageing populations are one of the fastest growing markets, anticipated to reach 1.4 billion individuals globally by 2030, this social innovation proposition is ideal from a Design Thinking perspective (UN 2015:4). There is a clear user and market need (desirability); the development of new products is practicable given Eureka's existing manufacturing capabilities (feasibility); and the potential for profitability and growth is vast (viability).

Moreover, the brief frames the 'social benefit' of the potential new cleaning product line as helping individuals who have been "*impaired* by the ageing process" to remain independent for longer by being better able to take care of themselves and their homes (RSA SDA 2017:11, emphasis added). It goes on to note, moreover, that there is "a practical economic benefit in enabling older people to retain their independence, as the cost of providing social care is set to rise in line with the increase in the senior population" (RSA SDA 2017:11). Thus, the brief normatively constructs the elderly as individuals who are obliged to ensure self-care and to remain active, contributing participants in the economy. Critically, this ability (or inability) for self-care is not only seen as an economic responsibility but a *moral responsibility* as well. Political theorist Wendy Brown (2003:42) notes in this regard:

Neoliberalism ... figures individuals as rational, calculating creatures whose moral autonomy is measured by their capacity for 'self-care' ... In making the individual fully responsible for her- or himself, neoliberalism equates moral responsibility with rational action; it erases the discrepancy between economic and moral behavior by configuring morality entirely as a matter of rational deliberation about costs, benefits, and consequences. But in so doing, it carries responsibility for the self to new heights: the rationally calculating individual bears full responsibility for the consequences of his or her action no matter how severe the constraints on this action ...

There are other areas for responsabilisation contained within the RSA SDA briefs. One focuses on preventing mental health issues in order to improve productivity within the workplace, because “productivity losses at work occur from people taking time off for mental health reasons, but also from people being at work yet working at a sub-optimal level” (RSA SDA 2017:5). Another aims to counteract poor sleep caused by “stress, money worries and mobile devices”, again to improve mental health and wellbeing (RSA SDA 2017:7). Another brief promotes active participation within the economy via formal financial institutions: “having access to a bank (and associated things like a savings account, debit card, insurance and lines of credit) and having the knowledge and skills to use them effectively, is important for anyone wanting to participate fairly and fully in everyday life” (RSA SDA 2017:13).

All of these “pressing issues” are consequently framed according to the logic of exchange value, where considerations of morality, ethics and duty are replaced with those of profitability, utility and efficacy (RSA SDA 2017:1). Critically, this method of appropriating and commodifying domains which previously existed outside of the logic of ‘the market’ is central to the neoliberal project of privatisation and marketisation, where public utilities of all kinds, including those associated with social welfare, are devolved from the state into private, profit-centric domains (Harvey 2007:35). In turn, issues of social justice and related ethico-moral questions, which were previously the concern of civil society, trade unions and political parties, become “the business of market actors” (Shamir 2008:35).

It is important to emphasise, however, that even outside of sponsored competitions such as the RSA SDA, market logic and the responsabilisation of the citizen-subject fundamentally underpin *all* Design Thinking projects, including those that are ‘self-initiated’. Typically, these kinds of projects begin with formulating a ‘How Might We...?’ question (abbreviated to an ‘HMW’ in Design Thinking-speak) based on the designer/student-designer’s unique socio-geographic concerns (Design Kit 2017:[sp]). While HMWs can take up issues from climate change, to resource inequality, to the provision of basic services (after all, it takes very little to frame a question as, say, ‘How might we improve sanitation within community X?’), the methodology ultimately relies on turning identified problems into market opportunities. Arguably, self-initiated briefs are all the more duplicitous in that design students are encouraged to view their local communities and environments as untapped resources from which to mine ‘opportunities’ for innovation. Innovation which can then be ‘sold back’ to the in-need community, as products or services, under the banner of ‘social good’.

In both directed and self-initiated briefs then, Design Thinking’s ‘for-the-public-good’ approach can be seen not only as a calculated strategy to gain access to new markets, but, more worryingly, as its own self-perpetuating market system. Given the neoliberal devolution of state responsibility, there *is* an increasing need to ‘fill the gaps’. However, as the products and services devised by Design Thinking offer solutions that are temporary rather than systemic, new ‘opportunities’ will emerge in due course which will require further ‘innovation’.

In adopting this relationship to society, Design Thinking reveals itself as an ideological tool which positions marketisation and responsabilisation as ‘pragmatic solutions’ to pressing socio-environmental issues. In this sense, there is a push for ‘social change’ – but perhaps not in the ameliorative sense that its buzzwords (empathetic, connected, human-centred, engaged) imply. Rather, any epistemological distinction between ‘society’ and ‘the economy’ collapses.



Corporations are transfigured into moral and political agents; citizens into market-actors; and civil society and its domains (healthcare, education, social welfare, and of course elderly care) into market entities (Shamir 2008:6). While student design briefs such as the 'Hygienic Home' brief are (arguably) relatively benign, the stakes escalate rapidly when applied to highly vulnerable communities, and critical issues such as poverty, and water and food security.

### iii

A further problem associated with Design Thinking, and indeed user-centred design more broadly, is that in responding to 'real-world' issues, the approach necessitates the use of techniques traditionally associated with the social sciences. That is, Design Thinking along with (inter alia) Service Design and User Experience Design, all require the use of primary ethnographic research methods in order to glean 'human-centred insights'. These include participant observation studies, structured and semi-structured interviews, user-testing, and participatory action research, amongst others (Fife 2005:6; Genzuk 2003:2). However, researchers have questioned the degree to which ethical considerations, which are so central to social science research, have been diffused into design practice, along with the ethnographic methodologies themselves (see Wasson 2000; and Miller 2014). Within a design context, 'ethics' generally refer to standards of professional behaviour and good business practice rather than *research ethics* which prioritise a legal and ethical responsibility to the discipline and to the participants involved (Miller 2014:64).

Ethnographic research forms the first 'mode' or step in the Design Thinking process (see Fig. 2). The designer/student-designer is encouraged to 'empathise' with people by (inter alia): observing them in their natural environment; conducting interviews; story-sharing; bodystorming ("the act of physically experiencing a situation in order to immerse oneself fully in the users' environment"); and photographing or recording target users; in order to "step into other people's shoes [and] to understand their lives" (Interaction Design Foundation 2018:[sp]; IDEO 2015:22). Critically, however, key handbooks which define these methodologies – such as IDEO's *Field Guide to Human-Centred Design* (2015) and the d-school's *Bootcamp Bootleg* (first published in 2009) – make no reference to ethics, or to ethics in research practice. As such, even standard research norms around issues such as informed consent, risk, confidentiality, disclosure, material harm, inclusion and exclusion (see Iphofen 2013), are not positioned as being integral to the process of Design Thinking.

Perhaps, more worryingly, Design Thinking not only uses ethnographic research techniques but goes one step further in actively seeking to *effect* change. In this sense, Design Thinking supersedes the already problematic use of participant research and enters into the professional domain of social work by attempting to "intervene at points where people interact with their environments" (IASSW 2018). However, this occurs with none of the associated regulatory policies or frameworks, or socio-political situatedness of social work practice and discourse.

Briefly looking at a South African social work context, for example, the South African Council for Social Service Professions (SACSSP) provides clear directives for social workers and student social workers around (inter alia) transparency, consent, accountability, confidentiality, professionalism, and so forth (SACSSP 2018). These are then detailed in relation to the law,

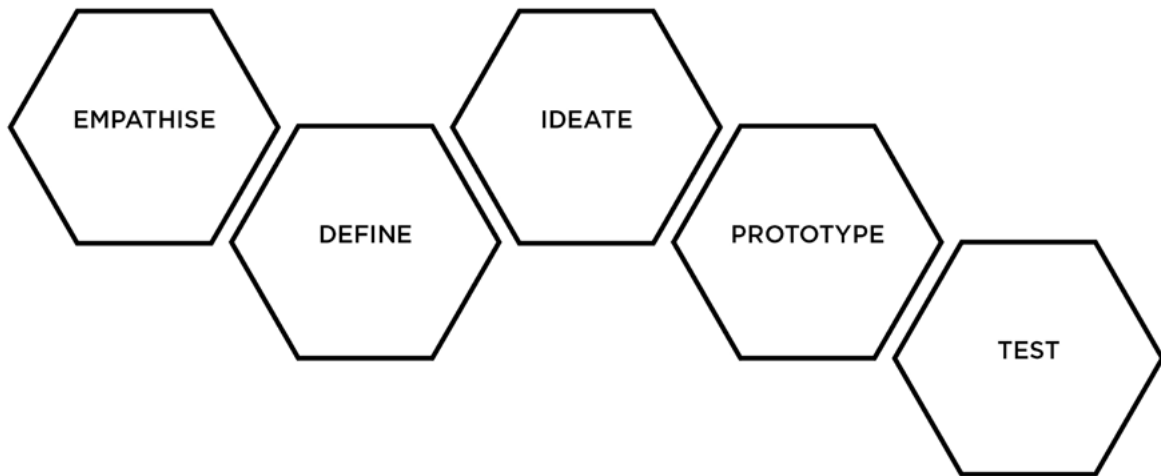


Figure 2. Infographic showing the steps involved in the Design Thinking process (d-school 2009:1)

education, research and practice. By doing so, the Council seeks to ensure that the profession is regulated; that professional conduct and ethical behaviour is maintained; that there is compliance with professional standards; and ultimately, that the social service profession, student social workers, and the interests of the public at large are safeguarded (SACSSP 2018:1). What is perhaps most significant, is that failing to register and comply with the SACSSP and its guidelines is considered a criminal offence, punishable by up to six months' imprisonment (see SACSSP 1978:26). Critically, this is not meant to unnecessarily hyperbolise the risks attached to Design Thinking, but rather to highlight the comparative seriousness with which social work practice and education view their interventions in, and responsibilities to, society.

Alongside ethical norms and standards, the domain of social work is also acutely aware of discursive issues around power, privilege, and oppression, and how these structures shape the relationships between participants and social workers (see, for example, Strier 2006, and Potts & Brown 2016). Specifically, social work practice recognises that the interaction between social workers and the public is not simply a neutral technical exercise, but one that is underpinned by complex power dynamics, which are in turn influenced by each party's own socio-political perspectives around (inter alia) race, gender, economic access and class privilege. Again, and as underscored in the previous section, Design Thinking has no such situatedness and, in fact, deliberately positions itself outside of these kinds of theoretical contingencies (Brown & Katz 2011:382). This is all the more problematic in that designers and/or student-designers are often encouraged to target vulnerable communities – either through design awards such as the D&AD White Pencil Award or through universities' active citizenship programmes. Again, the RSA SDA briefs are helpful in highlighting this tendency. The 'Fair Finance for All' brief, for example, which is sponsored by NatWest Bank, asks students to:

focus on a disadvantaged group or segment of low-income people anywhere in the developed or developing world, but whoever you focus on, you should explore the real user need/s of your target audience through primary research ... observe, engage with and listen to them (RSA SDA 2017:13).

Given Design Thinking's rejection of criticality; the lack of reflexivity in relation to the designer's and/or student-designer's relative position of privilege; and the active targeting of 'disadvantaged' groups as new markets for innovation; the practice risks replicating an approach to social change once adopted by colonial missionaries. That is, using self-professed good work to conceal an underlying motive of growth and expansion in the face of economic stagnation (Robinson 2016:4). As history has shown, this results in a boon for the 'benefactors', but potentially deleterious consequences for the 'beneficiaries', including the degradation of pre-existing cultural knowledge and identity and a manufactured dependency on the newly insinuated paradigm (see Smith 2014).

#### iv

Where then does this leave higher education and Design Thinking? At best, I would argue, Design Thinking encourages a kind of uncritical 'volunteer tourism' in which designers and/or student-designers gain creative capital (awards, a 'great portfolio piece', 'good' public relations) from 'community engagement' projects, often with little to no benefit to the participating communities. At worst, the strategy could be likened to a form of neo-colonialism or, as Bruce Nussbaum (2010:[sp]) has it, new-imperialism, where designers, along with their 'innovation partners' (corporate and/or university sponsors), actively seek out new mercantile opportunities within vulnerable communities under the mantle of 'effecting positive social-change'.

Looking again at the 2017-2018 RSA SDA competition, this critical assessment is borne out in the award-winning projects for each brief. For example, two projects, 'Flowboard' and 'Hungryr', received top merit awards for the Natwest 'Working Well' competition, which sought to "promote greater wellbeing when people are at work ... [to] ... contribute to higher productivity and better overall mental health". 'Flowboard' is a 'springpad' device which can be added on to existing desks to increase the amount of physical activity workers do during prolonged periods of inactivity while seated (RSA Winners 2018:[sp]; Van Krieken Design 2018:[sp]), while 'Hungryr' is an online grocery delivery platform targeted specifically at commercial truck drivers to improve their eating habits. As the business case for the app notes, due to the sedentary nature of their job, their low salary and lack of benefits, they are at high risk of developing diabetes, obesity, heart disease and other chronic illnesses (RSA Hungryr 2018:[sp]).

The 'Hygienic Home' brief winners included 'Buddi', a cleaning product which is both a vacuum cleaner and an air purifier (RSA Winners 2018:[sp]), and 'Smartbot', a "laser directed robot vacuum cleaner, which eliminates bending and muscle load" (RSA Winners 2018:[sp]). However, each of 'solutions' begs the question as to who ultimately benefits most from these societal interventions. Is it the employees who are able to sit for longer periods at their desks? Is it the commercial drivers who never have to leave their trucks, and can better stave off health issues associated with being overworked and underpaid? Or is it the elderly who can purchase a *new product* to breathe 'fresh air', despite the paradox that the air is polluted precisely because of the unimpeded industrial pursuit of new products in the first place? Is it the employers who will have an improved, self-managing, unremitting workforce on tap? Or is it corporate capitalism who has identified new markets to expand into, new products to manufacture, and new services to offer?

Although this overview is ultimately an indictment of Design Thinking, this is not to say that

designers should avoid engaging with social issues and concerns, or remain concerned solely with 'traditional' authorial and/or formalist notions of design. Indeed, this kind of cynical distancing only undermines the transformative potential of the field. However, the uncritical fetishisation of Design Thinking and innovation, and the associated techno-utopian rhetoric around the practice, needs to be balanced with an understanding of context, causality and consequence if it is to be deployed in ways that are of real and lasting benefit to society.

While a concrete articulation of what *critical* Design Thinking pedagogy and practice might look like remains outside of the core analytical scope of this chapter, the research does suggest, albeit *via negativa*, a possible solution. Namely, given the 'lacks' identified within current Design Thinking – a lack of situatedness, a lack of criticality, a lack of ethical and pedagogical rigour, and so on – transdisciplinarity would suggest a logical way forward. Such an approach would entail the integration of pre-existing theories and methodologies from other fields, resulting in the creation of new conceptual frameworks and research strategies that extend beyond Design Thinking's current narrow disciplinary boundaries (Haire-Joshu & McBride 2013:5). Starting points might include drawing on existing participatory frameworks from (inter alia) the visual arts (such as littoral aesthetics, relational aesthetics or dialogical aesthetics); education (for example, dialogic action, communicative action or Culturally Responsive Arts Education); and sociology (Actor Network Theory or object-oriented sociology) as a way of deepening designers' and/or student-designers' understanding of participation and the complex power relations inherent in ethnographic research and co-creation. Existing literature from the field of Science and Technology Studies (STS) could assist in better contextualising innovation and technology in relation to politics, policy, and society; allowing designers and/or student-designers to understand the root cause of a given issue, rather than simply viewing it symptomatically. Models from sociology and social work, such as the SACCSP's regulatory frameworks, could provide entry points for improved professional conduct and ethical safeguarding for designers and/or student-designers and participants in the midst of Design Thinking initiatives (BASW 2018:[sp]).

While these suggestions sketch out only the briefest outline of possible epistemic integration, what they do illustrate is the transformative potential transdisciplinarity might offer in developing and mapping out a more nuanced field of Design Thinking.

In the interim, however, it seems pressing that design educators urgently take a critical view of Design Thinking, to ensure that the rhetorical hyperbolisation of the practice as a panacea for global crises is balanced with an understanding that it is not an inherently emancipatory practice, but rather, one that has the potential to do more harm than good.

## Sources cited

---

- Midea launched with 10-year warranty. 2017. *ACR Journal*. [O]. Available: <http://www.acrjournal.uk/uk/midea-launched-with-10-year-warranty>  
Accessed 21 March 2018.
- Barrett, R. 2016. Innovation rhetoric and reality: an introduction to the TIM Review's special issue on innovation and entrepreneurship in Australia. *Technology Innovation Management Review* 6(6):5-10.
- BASW. 2018. PCF – the professional capabilities framework. [O]. Available: <https://www.basw.co.uk/resources/pcf-professional-capabilities-framework>  
Accessed 27 August 2018.
- BRICS. 2017. BRICS action plan for innovation cooperation (2017-2020). [O]. Available: <https://brics2017.org/English/Headlines/201708/P020170825384436195685.pdf>  
Accessed 21 March 2018.
- Brown, T. [Sa]. Design Thinking. IDEO U. [O]. Available: <https://www.ideo.com/pages/design-thinking>  
Accessed 21 March 2018.
- Brown, T & Katz, B. 2011. Change by design. *Journal of Product Innovation Management* 28(3):381-383.
- Brown, W. 2003. Neo-liberalism and the end of liberal democracy. *Theory & Event* 7(1).
- Buchanan, R. 1992. Wicked problems in Design Thinking. *Design: Critical and Primary Sources* 8(2):5-21.
- Castillo, L, Diehl, JC & Brezet, H. 2012. Design considerations for base of the pyramid (BoP) projects. Paper presented at *Cumulus*, Helsinki: 1-15.
- Cross, N. 1982. Designerly ways of knowing. *Design Studies* 3(4):221-227.
- d-school. 2009. Bootcamp Bootleg. Stanford d-school. [O]. Available: <https://dschool.stanford.edu/resources/the-bootcamp-bootleg>  
Accessed 21 March 2018.
- d-school. 2017. The d-school in Africa. [O]. Available: <http://www.ds.school.uct.ac.za/d-school-africa>  
Accessed 21 March 2018.
- D&AD. 2018. What's worthy of a D&AD White Pencil? [O]. Available: <https://www.dandad.org/en/d-ad-whats-worthy-white-pencil-social-good/>  
Accessed 7 February 2018.
- Dalsgaard, P. 2014. Pragmatism and Design Thinking. *International Journal of Design* 8(1):143-155.
- Dam, R & Siang, T. 2018. From prototype to product: ensuring your solution is feasible and viable. *The Interaction Design Foundation*. [O]. Available: <https://www.interaction-design.org/literature/article/from-prototype-to-product-ensuring-your-solution-is-feasible-and-viable>  
Accessed 16 April 2018.
- Design Kit. 2017. [O]. Available: <http://www.designkit.org/methods/3>  
Accessed 1 March 2018.
- Desis Network. [Sa]. [O]. Available: <http://www.desisnetwork.org/>  
Accessed 21 March 2018.
- DiSalvo, C. 2015. *Adversarial design*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Edinburgh College of Art. [Sa]. Design for change – MA | Edinburgh College of Art. [O]. Available: <https://www.eca.ed.ac.uk/study/postgraduate/design-change-ma>  
Accessed 21 March 2018.
- Fife, W. 2005. *Doing fieldwork: ethnographic methods for research in developing countries and beyond*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Fleischmann, K. 2015. The democratisation of design and design learning: how do we educate the next-generation designer? *International Journal of Arts & Sciences* 08(06):101-108.
- Genzuck, M. 2003. *A synthesis of ethnographic research*. Occasional Paper Series, Center for Multicultural, Multilingual Research. Los Angeles: Rossier School of Education, University of Southern California. [O]. Available: [http://www-bcf.usc.edu/~genzuck/Ethnographic\\_Research.pdf](http://www-bcf.usc.edu/~genzuck/Ethnographic_Research.pdf)  
Accessed 21 March 2018.
- Grant, J & Davis, P. 2008. Awards madness. *Eye Magazine*. [O]. Available: <http://www.eyemagazine.com/feature/article/awards-madness>  
Accessed 7 April 2018.
- Haire-Joshu, D & McBride, T. 2013. *Transdisciplinary public health: research, education, and practice*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Harvey, D. 2007. Neoliberalism as creative destruction. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 610(1):21-44.
- IASSW. 2018. Global Definition of Social Work. [O]. Available: <https://www.iassw-aiets.org/global-definition-of-social-work-review-of-the-global-definition/>  
Accessed 10 September 2018.

- IDEO. 2015. *The field guide to human-centered design: design kit*. San Francisco: IDEO. [O]. Available: <http://www.designkit.org/resources/1>  
Accessed 7 February 2018.
- IDEO U. [Sa]. Design Thinking. [O]. Available: <https://www.ideou.com/pages/design-thinking>  
Accessed 21 March 2018.
- Interaction Design Foundation. 2018. *Stage 1 in the Design Thinking process: empathise with your users*. [O]. Available: <https://www.interaction-design.org/literature/article/stage-1-in-the-design-thinking-process-empathise-with-your-users>  
Accessed 21 March 2018.
- International Monetary Fund. 2016. Fiscal monitor: acting now, acting together. [O]. Available: <http://www.imf.org/en/Publications/FM/Issues/2016/12/31/Acting-Now-Acting-Together>  
Accessed 21 March 2018.
- Iphofen, R. 2015. *Research Ethics in Ethnography/Anthropology*. European Commission.
- Johansson-Sköldberg, U, Woodilla, J & Çetinkaya, M. 2013. Design Thinking: past, present and possible futures. *Creativity and Innovation Management* 22(2):121-146.
- Kimbell, L. 2011. Rethinking Design Thinking: part I. *Design and Culture* 4(2).
- Lemke, T. 2002. Foucault, governmentality, and critique, rethinking Marxism. *Rethinking Marxism; A Journal of Economics, Culture & Society* 14(3):49-64.
- Miller, CZ. 2014. Lost in translation? Ethics and ethnography in Design Research. *Journal of Business Anthropology* 1(1):62.
- Nussbaum, B. 2010. The new imperialism. MIT. [O]. Available: <http://mitpsc.mit.edu/globalchallenge/?p=417>  
Accessed 21 March 2018.
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. 2015. OECD Innovation Strategy 2015: an agenda for policy action. [O]. Available: <https://www.oecd.org/sti/OECD-Innovation-Strategy-2015-CMIN2015-7.pdf>  
Accessed 21 March 2018.
- O'Kennedy, T. 2011. D&AD launches White Pencil award. Campaign: marketing, advertising and media news & analysis. [O]. Available: [https://www.campaignlive.co.uk/article/d-ad-launches-white-pencil-award/1065389?src\\_site=brandrepublic](https://www.campaignlive.co.uk/article/d-ad-launches-white-pencil-award/1065389?src_site=brandrepublic)  
Accessed 19 August 2018.
- Papanek, V. 1971. *Design for the real world: human ecology and social change*. London: Thames & Hudson.
- Paris College of Art. 2018. MA in Design for Social Impact. [O]. Available: <https://www.paris.edu/programs/graduate/master-design-for-social-impact/>  
Accessed 21 March 2018.
- Potts, K & Brown, L. 2016. Becoming an anti-oppressive researcher, in *Rethinking society in the 21st century: critical readings in sociology*, edited by M Webber & K Bezanson. Toronto: Canadian Scholars Press: 90-106.
- Ravensbourne. 2017. MDes Social Innovation. [O]. Available: <https://www.ravensbourne.ac.uk/study-here/postgraduate/mdes-social-innovation/>  
Accessed 21 March 2018.
- RSA. 2015. Design for good: ninety years of the RSA Student Design Awards. RSA. [O]. Available: <https://www.thersa.org/discover/publications-and-articles/reports/design-for-good-ninety-years-of-the-rsa-student-design-awards>  
Accessed 17 April 2018.
- RSA Hungryr. 2018. RSA Student Design Awards. 22 May. [O]. Available: <https://www.facebook.com/1753320224997784/photos/a.1984008575262280/1984018441927960/?type=3&theater>  
Accessed 8 September 2018.
- RSA Student Design Awards. 2017. RSA Student Design Awards Competition Pack 2017/2018. RSA. [O]. Available: <https://www.thersa.org/globalassets/pdfs/sda-briefs/sda17-18-competition-pack-final.pdf>  
Accessed 27 August 2018.
- RSA Winners. 2018. Winners 2017/2018. RSA. [O]. Available: <https://www.thersa.org/action-and-research/rsa-projects/design/student-design-awards/winners/winners-2018>  
Accessed 8 September 2018.
- Robinson, WI. 2016. Global capitalism and the restructuring of education: the transnational capitalist class' quest to suppress critical thinking. *Social Justice* 43(4):1-24
- South African Council for Social Service Professions. 2018. *Policy guidelines for course of conduct, code of ethics, and the rules for social workers*.
- South African Council for Social Service Professions. 1978. *Social Service Professions Act 110 of 1978*.
- Scott Swan, & Zou, Shaoming. 2012. *Interdisciplinary approaches to product design, innovation, & branding in international marketing (Advances in International Marketing 23)*. Bingley: Emerald Group Publishing.
- Shamir, R. 2008. The age of responsabilization: on market-embedded morality. *Economy and Society* 37(1):1-19.
- Sharma, A. 2012. Designing empowerment – Design

- Thinking for social impact, in *Interdisciplinary approaches to product design, innovation, & branding in international marketing (Advances in International Marketing 23)*, edited by K Scott Swan & Shaoming Zou. Emerald Group Publishing: 195-205.
- Smith, L. 2014. Historiography of South African Social Work: challenging dominant discourses. *Social Work* 50(3):305-331.
- Strier, R. 2006. Anti-oppressive research in Social Work: a preliminary definition. *British Journal of Social Work* 37(5):857-871.
- Szczepanska, J. 2017. Design thinking origin story plus some of the people who made it all happen. *Medium*. [O]. Available: <https://medium.com/@szczpanks/design-thinking-where-it-came-from-and-the-type-of-people-who-made-it-all-happen-dc3a05411e53> Accessed 21 March 2018.
- The New School. [O]. Available: <https://www.newschool.edu/desis/> Accessed 7 December 2018.
- Thomsen, D. 2015. Why Human-Centered Design Matters. *Wired*. [O]. Available: <http://www.wired.com/insights/2013/12/human-centered-design-matters/> Accessed 21 March 2018.
- United Nations. 2015. World Population Ageing Report. [O]. Available: [http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/publications/pdf/ageing/WPA2015\\_Report.pdf](http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/publications/pdf/ageing/WPA2015_Report.pdf) Accessed 7 December 2018.
- Van der Ryn, S & Cowan, S. 2007. *Ecological design*. Washington, DC: Island Press.
- Van Krieken Design. 2018. Flowboard. [O]. Available: <https://vankriekendesign.wixsite.com/design/flowboard> Accessed 8 September 2018.
- Wasson, C. 2000. Ethnography in the field of Design. *Human Organization* 59(4):377-388.
- Webber, M & Bezanson, K (eds). 2016. *Rethinking society in the 21st century: critical readings in sociology*. Toronto: Canadian Scholars Press.
- Žižek, S. 2006. *Selected writings/the universal exception*. London: Continuum.