

Queering Future(s) of Digital Design Education in India

1600 words
7 minute read

A sneak peak inside my head.

Oh, how risqué of me (?).

They either gonna simp this or it's the end of your career. Well, either way, it will do something.

A pre-presentation document submitted by Shemal Pandya, a freelance educator, for the online conference- Encountering Design Education Online: From Place to Space organized by School of Design, Ambedkar University, Delhi along with Srishti Manipal Institute of Art, Design and Technology, Bangalore. Submitted August 20, 2020.

Dear Reader,

Thank you for choosing to read this trailer of my presentation. To be honest, perhaps this is a blatant attempt by me to buy some time to finish my analyses and construct an argument- but it is somewhere in between the messy intersections of thoughts presented below- or perhaps it is an attempt at honest and transparent communication, and clout for more people to be present when I am presenting my final paper.

It is two hours past midnight, and impatiently, I say this - for patience, a noble virtue, is running thin for me these days. After almost a decade, I moved back to my parent's house- to save the meager funds I have in these anxious times, and to save the anxiety of not looking after my parents. Five of us in five hundred square feet, the scenery around me is both pretty and horrific. A queer freelance design educator, I am aware of the privileged position I occupy, and the choices I have should it get unbearable for me, but for now, I endure. And unfortunately, or fortunately, you might choose to endure me for some time.

My aim today is to reflect on three seemingly disparate events- (i) an online course I conducted with second year undergraduate students of The Design Village, Noida, for Belongg, “a community platform that brings discrimination free services to people who face bias because of their gender, sexuality, race, caste, religion or ability.” (“Belongg”), (ii) a workshop I conducted on developing queer pedagogy for design education in India, and (iii) my reflexive performance of being a queer student, and now an educator, to question what the fuck am I doing in the times of corona?

I emphasize on choice, for virtually, I have no idea if you are or are not listening to me. Some of you might be having an early lunch, or just waking up, or enjoying a hot shower (definitely, not speaking from experience) while listening to this, but therein lies the doubly freedom of the digital space.

Various educators, administrators and policy makers are, and have spoken about responding to the pandemic in both global (Bao; Basilaia and Kvavadze; Cook and Grant-Davis; Zhou et al.) and Indian (Goswami; Jena; Kumar; Srivastava et al.) context of digital education in recent times, the focus is on mitigating the changes on the status quo using digital technologies and internet based delivery of services. Specifically, for design education, these three days will be instrumental in understanding the texture, and the tone of the conversations that we are engaging in- and I look forward to hearing and learning from our collective voices. However, semesters have begun at two of the three colleges I usually engage with, and the approach at both has been a rushed, and lieu of the contemporary directions in other disciplines outlined by the people spoken of before. A band-aid on how we translate the courses in the digital format- the courses remain the same, the medium of instruction changes. Perhaps, sometimes, we re-think the course, but the frame of viewing it is still from that of what we had at the start of twenty-twenty.

When I think back at both my undergraduate and graduate college- a journey from twenty eleven to twenty eighteen- I think of the spaces it gave me- space to understand who I am, space to develop my identity, space to explore, space to grow, space to demarcate my independence, space to understand responsibilities, through places of absence of supervision, places of sneaked alcohol consumption, places of secret fornications, places to have intimate interactions, places of shared aspirations. I fear, in the fear of delivering the planned course, I might miss on providing these spaces, and places to the learners. I fear that our purpose as an institution, will become just a provider of a certificate, a provider of accreditation, a provider of-

I wonder what it would be like if I make this into an audio submission- I have not experimented with it yet, perhaps I should give it a try. But what happens when it is my voice, rather than my words, which are put on display? What happens when there is no body- the disembodiment of my voice, how will it interact with the people? I wonder what I will sound like, I wonder if students will make fun of me. I mean I know I have a pitchy voice, and I know that the microphone on my ancient computer make it tinnier, and they know I am gay, I wonder if I will sound intelligent? I can no longer impress them with my clothes, or with my articulation, for I must keep things simple, but I hope I can impress them by being kind, I guess? I mean whatever, its okay, we are all going through the same shizz, how bad can it be? I think I will make this a combination of voice and text, maybe it is an overkill, but hey, I am known for that right? What if it does not work? I have some ex-students and my peers present here today- I have my parents sitting next to me because they are excited and they don't get to see what I do in my life- but of course, it is going to be difficult- for I will have to come out to them yet again, and deal with the drama yet again- but I hope its worth it. I hope this is entertaining, or at least provocative for you.

Where was I, yes- provider of a product or a service- to be bought and consumed and then contractually negotiated. What does it mean to be an institution, which does not, or cannot provide embodied experiences? How far can we push the envelope?

I look at this case study for three main reasons: (i) to understand the changing relationships of an educator and learner in digital environments, (ii) to unpack the idea of empathy within online design pedagogy, and (iii) to look at the challenges faced by learners in understanding representation, empowerment and privilege. I draw attention to these three reasons to argue that the conventional practices aimed at mitigating the effects of the pandemic rupture in education might not be sufficient- and argue that if we are to respond to the crisis we must have a departure from the positivist paradigm of Design education, still stuck in its Bauhausian past, and use this rupture to queer design education. I draw from Sedgwick's notion of queer- "the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excess of meaning... to signify monolithically" (1993).

It was 7th March when we finished introducing ourselves on Google Sheets- Name, Gender, Caste, Sexuality, Geographies of importance, Education Level, and Hobbies. Five Cis-Males, Six Cis-Females, one Gender Queer Educator (me). Everyone was Hindu- no surprises there.

Four months later-

"I felt that you were not a mentor to me- you were never around."

Since the last four days, I have been braving the outside a little bit at a time- going for walks on roads which will not be populated and sneaking my smoke breaks now and then. People are living their lives- I see couples clicking selfies, I see rickshaw drivers having a drinking party in the middle of the street, I see people loitering! I get messages on Grindr for quick solicitations, and I was added to this Snapchat group which was planning an orgy in my neighborhood. Life is moving on, and the experiences I had in my college life guide me in navigating that moving on process, the inherently, place-embedded experiences. Sometimes I wonder, if I had never left home, what would I be? Would I still be the closeted, anxious, nerdy, quaint, bachha that my mother still sees me as? Would I be able to break from the troupes of my subconscious caste, class, and gender boundaries? Can I be "woke" if I had never left my home?

I bite back my retort- you mister, have missed 50 percent of your classes, so think before you speak. Also, what about that time when I spent two hours listening to your rant about life, and then trying to unpack the idea of what a mentor means for us in this course with you? Innocuous words spoken in anger and pain; I sat incredulously and fuming, then disappointedly- silent as my students bemoan the various reasons for them not being able to perform in this course- time overlaps, to health issues, to internet problems, all of them seemingly valid, but also seemingly convenient excuses. With a quarter hour a week allocated per student for mentoring, my online presence was constantly monitored- if I am online on WhatsApp, and I have not responded to their message immediately, I was being lousy- and “they had to go to other people who responded instantly.”

My apologetic smile frozen in place, one of them goes-
“I could not perform well in the mid-termjuries because I was hospitalized and have just came back home (sic).”

I argue that a disruptive queering of design education can contribute meaningfully in developing a citizen designer- one who’s professional and corporeal practices constructs a fairer, egalitarian society. I conclude with a question and a possibility- is it time to bid adieu to the studio as we know it, and why focus digital spaces of kinship, rituals, and new normalcy is essential for post pandemic design education.

Looking forward to presenting my work,
Shemal (He/ They)

In my head- while dealing with other things (like being home and re-learning to fabricate my closeted life), and digitizing all the coursework (while working with limited resources as an institution), the focus was on the project- and the 45 minutes spent a week seemed okay- that is what I was getting paid for right? Not being their chaperon.

Gurrl, you were literally on your extra project site work that day. How do I know- you bludgeoned me to follow you back on Instagram, and you then go ahead and do such rookie mistakes- lol- but I am also disappointed? You, not two fortnights ago, was having a heart to heart about how they are having questions about their own sexuality and gender, and I was there for them, and then now they have to go and pull this on me. Like I feel betrayed, you know. Oh well, this is turning into a sop story, and that is nothing but further from truth. But I will have elements of sappy drama, glorious negotiation of my past youth, and a crazy proposition when, and if you choose to listen to me on August 28th, sometime around noon.