

# “People are People”: Exploring Student-centred Design Thinking in the Co-creation of University Learning Experiences

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**Abstract:**

This article explores the relationship between a co-created student project and people-centred design thinking. Through a critical reflective inquiry approach, we explore the broader challenges and implications of implementing people-centred design principles, as opposed to approach, in the context of Higher Education today. The article is guided by the experiences of two academic members of university staff and their engagement with an innovative student-centred project and pedagogical framework titled *Thinking Inside the Box*. The purpose of this intentionally critical self-reflection is to mobilise these experiences of student-centred design thinking to identify learner and professional opportunities, challenges to innovation and other touchpoints at the individual, tactical, operational and strategic levels.

Keywords: Co-creation, peer-to-peer, innovation, Thinking Inside the Box, student-designed assessment, performative assessment

## **1. Introduction**

The case for Design Thinking – and related concept of ‘people-centred design’ - is particularly relevant for higher education, an environment that poses multiple barriers to innovative and transformative problem-solving. Hammond (2017), cited in Nerantzi and Thomas (2019), speaks to the ‘businessification’ of HE that lends itself to homogeneity through governance structures as tools of internal self-regulation and public policy that serve to remove spaces for innovation. Likewise, the academic practice of peer review leans to the consolidation of thinking as ‘conventional wisdom’. This analysis constitutes a notable trend to neoliberal thinking in UK Higher Education, one that is as well documented as it is contested (See Maisuria and Cole; 2017; Bamberger et. al., 2019).

Nonetheless, and befitting multi-dimensional institutions engaged in furthering knowledge and understanding, the higher education sector is simultaneously – particularly in British and US academia - exploring the possibilities of Design Thinking and people-centred design as pedagogical tools (see for example Wrigley and Staker, 2017; Wrigley and Mosely, 2023; Teaching and Learning Lab, no date). Speaking to these debates, our reflective practice paper explores the challenges of implementing people-centred design principles in the context of Higher Education (HE) today.

We draw from the particular experience of piloting a pedagogical framework known as Thinking Inside the Box, which we re-imagine through the conceptual lens of Design Thinking. It is important to acknowledge that Thinking Inside the Box – as both a particular time-bound project and as framework for pedagogic development – was not directly or explicitly grounded in people-centred design. In this sense, our dialogue with the principles and practices of people-centred design is retroactive.

We take a simplified reflective and (auto-) ethnographic approach to revisit our experiences as members of staff and co-collaborators on this co-curricular, student-led project. We use the term ‘(auto-) ethnographic’ to acknowledge the various collaborators whose contributions and interactions have shaped our reflections, in other words, we incorporate elements of participant observation alongside our principally auto-ethnographic approach. Drawing from Design Thinking literature, we note the relevance of this approach to incorporating values and practices of self-reflection and sense-making (Turner et. al, 2023). We engage the conceptual lens of Design Thinking, re-imagining the project as an example of people-centred pedagogical design (Jasper, 2013). Our reflection involves elements of document and discourse analysis: with the former allowing for analysis of printed and electronic documentation; and the latter consideration of discourses – or lines of argument -with Foucaultian thinking noted (Bowen, 2009; Dunn and Neumann, 2016). Mindful of these approaches, we draw from the various artefacts that emerged through our activities, including institutional strategy reports, correspondence with colleagues and other audio-visual and textual sources. Equally, to reinforce the validity of the

evidence, we situated these endeavours in a wider network of collaborators from multiple institutions, national and international organisations, and students from three University of London institutions: King’s College London, the London School of Economics and Queen Mary’s, as well as the University of Leeds.

We begin with a summary of the relevant literature on Design Thinking and people-centred design, as well as the related concept of Student-Centred Learning, to identify the key principles, mindsets and approaches that constitute Design Thinking in the Higher Education context. At the same time, we acknowledge the harmonies and tensions that arise when Design Thinking is confronted with decolonial and humanist critiques and concerns.

We contribute to and consolidate two objectives: first, to reflect on a time-bound learning programme, and second, to reflect on the ongoing development of a pedagogical approach. To do this, we reflect on our experiences of the 2022-2023 project dimension of *Thinking Inside the Box’s*, as well as its range of activities and achievements to date. Rather than evaluating the outcomes of the project itself, the main purpose of this critical reflection, in line with the cyclical design thinking processes of empathise, define, ideate, prototype, and test (Stanford, 2010), is to identify professional opportunities for academics and students, challenges to innovation and other touchpoints at the individual, tactical, operational and strategic levels. We also explore questions of trust, transparency, collaboration and the ‘trial and error’ of piloting, all of which act as significant sources of both support for and barriers to the implementation of people-centred learning design in HE today. In the process, we contemplate the potential complementarities between the decolonial and humanist framework of *Thinking Inside the Box* and Design Thinking in their respective approaches to co-design and co-production. We conclude with a general reflection on our experiences in implementing co-creational learning practices within UK HE today. In this paper, we engage with discourses around motivations for and impediments to innovative practices; recognising that innovation is in itself a contested term, one which brings about discourses of change (Nerantzi and Thomas, 2019, pp. 234-236).

## **2. From Design Thinking to Student-Centred Learning: Context and Literature Review**

Design Thinking itself is both a philosophical approach and a practical, methodological framework. The latter is perhaps best captured through the Design Council’s ‘double diamond’ model (Design Council, no date). By taking a problem-solving approach, the model guides a journey of discovery, definition, development and delivery to arrive at innovative solutions. The constellation of principles and mindsets that support and nurture this process has been conceptualised as ‘people-centred design’. In our interpretation, some of the key identifying features of these approaches are that they are: (1) contextually informed, experiential and shaped by what learners deem relevant to their learning; (2) grounded in problem solving;

responsive to iteratively problem framing questions; (3) co-created between a range of stakeholders; (4) simple and straightforward to begin with and; (5) iterative, with deliberate reflections to allow for piloting to be tested and retested; (6) collaborative in its deployment; (7) engaged creatively with a variety of non-text based formats; and (8) underpinned by the principle of inclusion. As befitting *Thinking Inside the Box*'s commitment to a decolonialising experience for all stakeholders the numbering of these considerations should not suggest a hierarchy (Selwyn, 2014).

In the academic realm, people-centred design has aligned with the umbrella term, Student-Centred Learning (SCL). SCL itself is a concept with several competing definitions, practices and standards, comprising a constellation of concepts, “such as flexible learning (Taylor, 2000), experiential learning (Burnard, 1999), self-directed learning” (O’Neill, McMahon and McMullin, 2005, p. 277), participatory learning (Veiga Simão and Flores, 2010), and cognitive, agentic and humanist approaches (Starkey, 2019). SCL has been argued to work well in technology-based learning environments (Bower and Hedberg, 2010, p. 462), as well as beyond the classroom, through co-design of internship experiences for students (Hora, Parrott and Her, 2020). It has been used to inform researcher, practitioner and policy-making practices (Starkey, 2019, p. 372), and has even emerged within sports coaching, where it known as player-centred learning (Paul et al., 2023).

There are both constructivist and humanist interpretations of SCL. In constructivist thinking there is an association with the neoliberal agenda of market-driven education and its conceptualisation of SCL as part of the buyer-seller or customer-provider relationship between institutions and their students (Starkey, 2019, p. 376). So while scholars such as Tangney and Barraket advocate a careful balance between constructivist and humanist approaches (Tangney, 2014; Barraket, 2005), SCL is “often associated more closely with constructivism, or principles associated with a constructivist environment such as building on prior knowledge, purposeful active learning and sense-making” (Tangney, 2014, p. 273). Equally, the majority of accounts frame SCL as part of a longer genealogy of ideas and theories developed in the Global North, drawing on key thinkers such as Frank Herbert Hayward, John Dewey, Carl Rogers, Jean Piaget and Malcolm Knowles. Within this thinking there remains a prioritisation of “teaching strategies and tools” (Fitzmaurice, 2010 cited in Tangney, 2014, p. 273) over “context, ideology and values” (Malcolm and Zukas, 2001 cited in Fitzmaurice, 2010, p. 53) poses a limitation to the humanist dimensions of SCL, especially as we consider contextual dimensions of people-centred design. Major institutions of the Global North have likewise established working definitions and guidelines of SCL, such as the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2018) and the European Students’ Union (Attard et al., 2010); and with it have established power dynamics that themselves shape human relations.

The argument that SCL has come about as a humanist turn in pedagogy has gained greater traction. This approach emphasises “the centrality of human freedom, choice and responsibility; holism whereby persons are interconnected with others and nature;

different forms of knowing; and the importance of time and space, and relationships” (Watson, 1985, cited in McCance and McCormack, 2021, p. 25). It has also been conceptualised as ‘relational pedagogy’ (Hinsdale and Ljungblad, 2016). Further, in aligning with the understanding the context and the stakeholders of Design Thinking, the humanist approach includes caring (McCance, Slater and McCormack, 2009, p. 409), empowerment, faith and trust, acknowledging feelings, prioritising process over product, creativity, and lifelong-learning (Tangney, 2014, p. 273; see also Mezirow, 2009; Rogers and Freiberg, 1994; Cowan, 2006). Humanist literature has increasingly paid attention to Global South scholars and interpretations, acknowledging the ‘liberationist’ and ‘transformative’ potential of SCL for both lecturers and students (see for example Freire, 1968). In this context, drawing on student and staff experiences as co-learners with feelings, emotions, interpretations and longer-term reflections has proven to reveal more about humanist dynamics of SCL than has the formulation of step-by-step toolkits. This literature has highlighted the particular difficulty of transitioning from hegemonic teacher-led practices to those that are student-centred.

The interpretations presented here allow us to reflect on certain features of SCL from a Design Thinking perspective, as they arose during the experience of *Thinking Inside the Box*. First, that the development of models intended for replication run the risk of limiting the ability to respond to the learners’ experiential imagination, and create exclusions which may run counter to elements of Design Thinking. Second, that the humanist approach is conducive to co-creation and collaboration between a range of stakeholders. And finally, that capturing collaborative experiences through experiential artefacts and reflections is an important part of generating new iterations. Each of these three reflections showcases overlap between Design Thinking and *Thinking Inside the Box* and shares the potential for intentional hybridisation moving forward.

### **3. Design Thinking, Inside the Box**

Acknowledging the lack of consensus and tensions around what constitutes SCL and its Design Thinking and people-centred dimensions, the practical and emotional challenges of its implementation, and the role of the neoliberal university in shaping student and staff experiences of the transition to SCL, we now focus upon on the project and framework of *Thinking Inside the Box*.

As a project, *Thinking Inside the Box* was first launched at the University of Leeds at the start of the 2022/2023 academic year. In light of the 50th anniversary of the Chilean coup d’état of 1973, this iteration of the project adopted a commemorative suffix: *Thinking Inside the Box: 1973*.

As a framework, *Thinking Inside the Box* was conceptualised in 2016 by a threefold academic team including Anna Grimaldi (then based at King’s College London), Vinicius de Carvalho (King’s College London) and Julio Cazzasa (Senate House Library). Following the cataloguing of an archive of political posters and pamphlets at

Senate House Library, University of London, these scholars set themselves the intellectual exercise of thinking inside the recently catalogued boxes. An initial symposium was held to promote the under-explored materials, stimulate debate and catalyse new pathways of research amongst the broader historian and Latin Americanist academic community (Cazzasa, 2016). In 2021, the invitation was extended to students from King’s College London University. Drawing on Freirian pedagogical approaches (Freire, 1968), students were guided to ‘perform’ the archive (Taylor, 2003) by engaging their situated worldviews and positionalities to interpret visual, textual and audio archival materials and collaboratively design, develop and deliver a series of outputs it a series of iterative opportunities (Brazil Institute, 2022).

These early iterations of the project brought to light the ways in which *Thinking Inside the Box* resonates with the key features of Design Thinking. To begin with, the framework is guided by values that shape its collaborative, iterative, multimodal and inclusive elements. *Thinking Inside the Box* is also contextually and experientially informed in the sense that it relies on the collective, real-time interpretation of all those involved, explicitly acknowledging and mobilising diverse lived and situated experiences to drive the co-creation of new knowledge and practices. This collective interpretation feeds into the simplicity of the project design, which is driven by the intellectual and sociological lines of enquiry that emerge through the process of co-creation. Importantly, as a co-curricular endeavour, *Thinking Inside the Box* supports stakeholders authentically, encouraging them to question, identify and address the issues that are important to them beyond the prescribed curriculum (or indeed their job descriptions), and to develop the collective combination of skills they need to do so. Given the project relies in practical terms on the organic and situational context in which it takes place, it is by nature iterative. Each iteration brings together the dynamics and experiences of a given group in a specific context, as well as the real world conditions that shape them, such as the number of participants, the scale and nature of intended outcomes, and the amount of available resources. The decolonial and humanist approach of *Thinking Inside the Box* underscores values such as empathy, curiosity, creativity, co-creation, iteration, diversity and inclusion, again emphasising the fundamentals of people-centred design (Design Council, no date) and Design Thinking (Interaction Design, no date; IDEO, no date).

#### **4. Thinking Inside the Box: 1973**

Thus far, *Thinking Inside The Box* has been an informal, voluntary, extra-curricular endeavour, rather than formally integrated into any credit bearing programme. Collaborators at all levels of the University have the opportunity to join; but it requires students, staff and any other stakeholders to engage voluntarily through working hours beyond the curricular. The lived experience of the project’s most recent manifestation, *Thinking Inside The Box: 1973*, at the University of Leeds, demonstrated its potential for inclusivity: the project’s people-centred design process meant that those who traditionally faced accessibility challenges were able to participate flexibly and fit their commitments around other responsibilities. Collaborators directly influenced the

project; for example in terms of the tempo of operations and the schedule by negotiating with peers, including students, academic staff and others, but also in shaping the project’s co-agreed outputs. Our reflection here therefore allows us to investigate the potential for greater emphasis on student-centred learning to inform and shape curriculum design through an inclusive, accessible and authentic project.

The project began when a series of invitations were sent out to various departments, academic staff, and student societies, chosen for their potential interest in topics such as the Cold War, Latin America, political resistance, social movements, human rights, archival research, visual analysis, and graphic design. In sharing this invitation and thereby establishing thematic parameters we recognised we were performing an act of exclusivity. This was shaped by the nature of the founding archive, our academic expertise and experience, and the enthusiasm and dedication. After receiving around 25 responses to the call, we organised our first meeting. At this initial meeting, we focused, while intentionally avoiding prescription on sharing narratives, ideas and practices from previous iterations (Brazil Institute, 2022), provoking students to imagine their own potentialities across contributions and roles in such a project. We discussed ideas around organising archive visits, holding workshops and seminars, producing digital content and engaging publics. The outcome to this initial engagement was a team of 13 students at Leeds, with counterpart teams across other institutions totalling 35.

These endeavours comprised what can retrospectively be identified as phase one: the piloting, intentional reviewing and re-iterating of intent and actions with collaborating stakeholders. Consciously, there was no distinction between content and process; the project exposed students to working in the real world where such clear delineations may not exist. Instead, the project foregrounds ‘messy’ research, acknowledging the liminal spaces where decisions are made with imperfect knowledge.

What followed in a liminal transition to phase two was outreach and engagement on behalf of the co-authors with different stakeholders internal to the University of Leeds and beyond. The project was driven by the commitment and solidarity of the people directly involved in the project, who volunteered their time and expertise. Likewise, the project gained emotional support, constructive feedback and other resources from peers across and outside the University. For stakeholders, the benefits of engaging participants in the framework as a reflective practice were immediately clear. Although it was too late for our 2022-23 iteration of the project, sharing the practices of *Thinking Inside the Box* allowed us to learn more about internal and external funding opportunities, which could serve future projects. Likewise, we learned the importance of presenting the *Thinking Inside the Box* framework in diverse terms, depending on different audiences, particularly those that have not previously valued such a modality.

Revisiting these experiences emphasises to us the value in adopting alternative lenses and framings, such as the Design Thinking approach and the opportunity for engagement with scholar/practitioners within the institution. In the early months of the

project, these encounters, organic conversations, debates and knowledge-exchange between stakeholders served several important purposes. Ultimately, the experience supported us through a steep institutional learning curve which involved living in a new city, navigating new processes and people, all the while attempting to demonstrate and promote the range of skills and experiences that the project had to offer. By *Thinking Inside the Box*, we, as participants, gained critical skills and context-specific abilities to problem-solve, which in turn allowed us to reflect and iterate the framework’s potential, identify opportunities and secure resources for future iterations.

These critical and flexible skills had already garnered support through internal and external avenues during 2022/23. Internally, at the University of Leeds, we had the support of the Centre for Teaching Innovation and Scholarship (<https://ctis.leeds.ac.uk/>), which provided us a platform through which to disseminate our activities. They also contributed to financing the project activities, and the co-directors’ advocacy at this early stage helped the project gain traction. Later, through the Laidlaw Leadership and Research Programme, we also gained the opportunity to collaborate with three Laidlaw Scholars. The Laidlaw Leadership and Research Programme “aims to develop a new generation of leaders, providing experiences and facilitating research projects in collaboration with Leeds academics for a six-week period during the summer” (Laidlaw, no date). At the time of writing, we are working with the Laidlaw Scholars to collect further data on the project through interviews, critically evaluating our design and outcomes, and using our findings to engage with broader debates in related fields of scholarship and pedagogy. This shows how *Thinking Inside the Box: 1973* guided us to interpretations and opportunities we might not otherwise have noticed or considered; and reinforced the iterative capacity of the project and the framework. Furthermore, it shows how the project has been able to significantly enhance the experience of students even beyond those directly engaged with the project.

We also applied to the British International Studies Association’s Learning and Teaching fund and won a small grant of just over £3,000. The grant was intended for “new and innovative International Studies activity or research into teaching and pedagogy” (BISA, no date), allowing us to focus on how our approach enhanced learning around global history through inter- and trans-national actors, organisations and artefacts. With the funding from BISA, the project was able to cover the costs for student participants to visit the archives, the costs of producing and reproducing artworks for an exhibition, inviting guest speakers and hosting networking receptions at events.

## **5. Conclusions: The people of people-centred design**

The principal output of the *Thinking Inside the Box* project, was a student-designed and -curated month-long exhibition at the University of Leeds. The team collaboratively designed and managed this major project through independent research in two physical archives and one digital collection, launching and running social media



campaigns, building and managing a website, working with local organisations, engaging with multiple communities and publics, and disseminating their work through blog posts, social media, a zine and a virtual exhibition. In doing this, the 1973 project team demonstrated a range of the key dimensions of Design Thinking, from collaboration to co-creation, from iteration to multimodal outputs.

The student participant’s activities brought together a broader network of support that facilitated, enhanced and promoted *Thinking Inside the Box: 1973* by sharing publications, events and other content. The presence of this network sustains ongoing activities and motivates future collaborations; with participants from this 2022/23 cohort, actively seeking out opportunities to support those contemplating engagement with the 2023/24. The extensive list of collaborators includes the Leeds University Union, which hosted the exhibition; the Liverpool Popular Music Archive’s Robert Pring-Mill Collection; Tallersol, a Chilean artistic collective; The Modern Endangered Archives Programme at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA); Senate House Library, whose collections formed the basis of the project; local organisations Left Bank, Hyde Park Book Club, and Art Space at Leeds Art Gallery, whose staff collaborated with students to design public-facing workshops; Footprint, a local cooperative printing company; local graphic designers Martin O’Dea and Eve Warren; the Chilean and Argentine Ambassadors to the UK; and, finally, the broader community of Chilean exiles and solidarity activists, including a Whatsapp group for Chileans in Yorkshire, the El Sueño Existe Festival, and the Chile 50 years project. These networks not only supported the project but opened doors for students in their future academic endeavours and professional development, while also mutually reinforcing the project’s networked framework and thereby demonstrating the overlap of the immediate project experience and the reflective opportunity to consider the framework *Thinking Inside the Box* provides.

Our reflective process, which draws from ethnographic methods and Design Thinking concepts of reflection and sense-making, has been particularly valuable. Multiple iterative cycles of collective critical reflection have generated and continue to generate (ongoing) data and outputs for further reflection and dissemination, such as through the drafting of this article. In terms of professional development, such outcomes contribute to pedagogical leadership and academic citizenship.

In a different, more conceptual sense, it has allowed the authors to address, and reflect on, the relationship between Design Thinking, Student Centred Learning and *Thinking Inside the Box*. *Thinking Inside the Box* offers the opportunity for an authentic learning experience. Together with students, we co-created objectives, teaching and learning content (readings, podcasts, films, music, etc.), seminars, lectures and workshops. Here we intentionally sought out the opportunity to work with students as partners in the design process (Nerantzi et al., 2023). Our endeavour was collaborative and team-taught, including colleagues at other institutions, and lasted for the equivalent of two semesters (October 2022 - May 2023). It included synchronous and asynchronous learning, authentic and synoptic assessable tasks and outputs, close supervision and

mentoring and collaboration with experienced academics, and was decolonial in its approach and delivery. It also proved itself to be fully online-ready, allowing us to build up a bank of relevant resources and knowledge on how to run the project fully online in future.

As a team, students had significant influence over when and where learning took place, who would be delivering the teaching, what the learning content looked like, and how we divided our time. The opportunity to actively align their own goals, their learning materials, activities, outputs, and, ultimately, their own transformative self-discovery, meant that students had a clear purpose in everything they did. Regular collective reflections further provided students an opportunity to practise narrating their experiential learning to others, especially in terms of their longer-term professional, intellectual and personal goals. While in some respects these features may not in themselves be wildly innovative, within the operational context of discipline and department – where approximately 95% of assessment is a written essay –, these showcased significant opportunities.

It is the potential of the *Thinking Inside the Box* framework to complement a breadth of existing expertise, with scope to incorporate future developments, that excites not only the authors but other stakeholders across the institution and the sector. In other words, we see *Thinking Inside the box* as a clear opportunity to have conversations that would not be possible otherwise: a level of knowledge exchange that cuts across extant institutional structures and processes facilitating transparency and enhancing trusting opportunities that allow for innovation and change. In doing this and with a clear focus upon the people of people centred design the stakeholders “need to be able to relate to a top-down strategy and have the freedom and the flexibility to input their own ideas to make change happen” (Nerantzi and Thomas, 2019, 237).

This reflection is a complement to our ongoing and future efforts to utilise the *Thinking Inside the Box* framework for twin goals: 1. to deliver and share a world-class learning experience for participants through future iterations - whether as voluntary enterprises or as part of a formal curriculum; and 2. To practise *Thinking Inside the Box* as an agent of personal, professional and pedagogical change in itself through rigorous self-evaluation and reiteration. Our endeavours have led to inspiring and fruitful dialogues across the university and beyond with supportive colleagues. This has important functions in terms of professional development, personal growth wellbeing and belongingness and as well as valuable ‘check and challenge’ opportunities embracing levels of uncertainty that reflects the twenty-first century world in which participants, scholars and universities exist.

Ultimately, this exercise and reflection-on-action has confirmed the urgent need for people-centred approaches to pedagogical design. Not only has this approach demonstrably engaged the targets of our University – and many others – in preparing students for the global challenges of the future, but it has also delivered transformative experiences fundamental to students’ educational and professional development in an

intentionally decolonial manner with further potential to diversify the student experience by considering the framework as one which is credit bearing. On the one hand, this has showcased potential; but it has also demonstrated the tensions that come with innovation whether explicit, as structural barriers or implicit, as unknowing ambivalence. In this regard, and with further opportunities for research and innovation, our exploration of student centred learning and the relationship of Design Thinking to *Thinking Inside the Box* has given students and staff alike autonomy over the learning journey, in a way that authentically addressed students’ personal goals and opened up new pathways to their further development; as well as giving staff opportunities to embrace collaborations with a range of stakeholders in non-hierarchical dialogues.

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