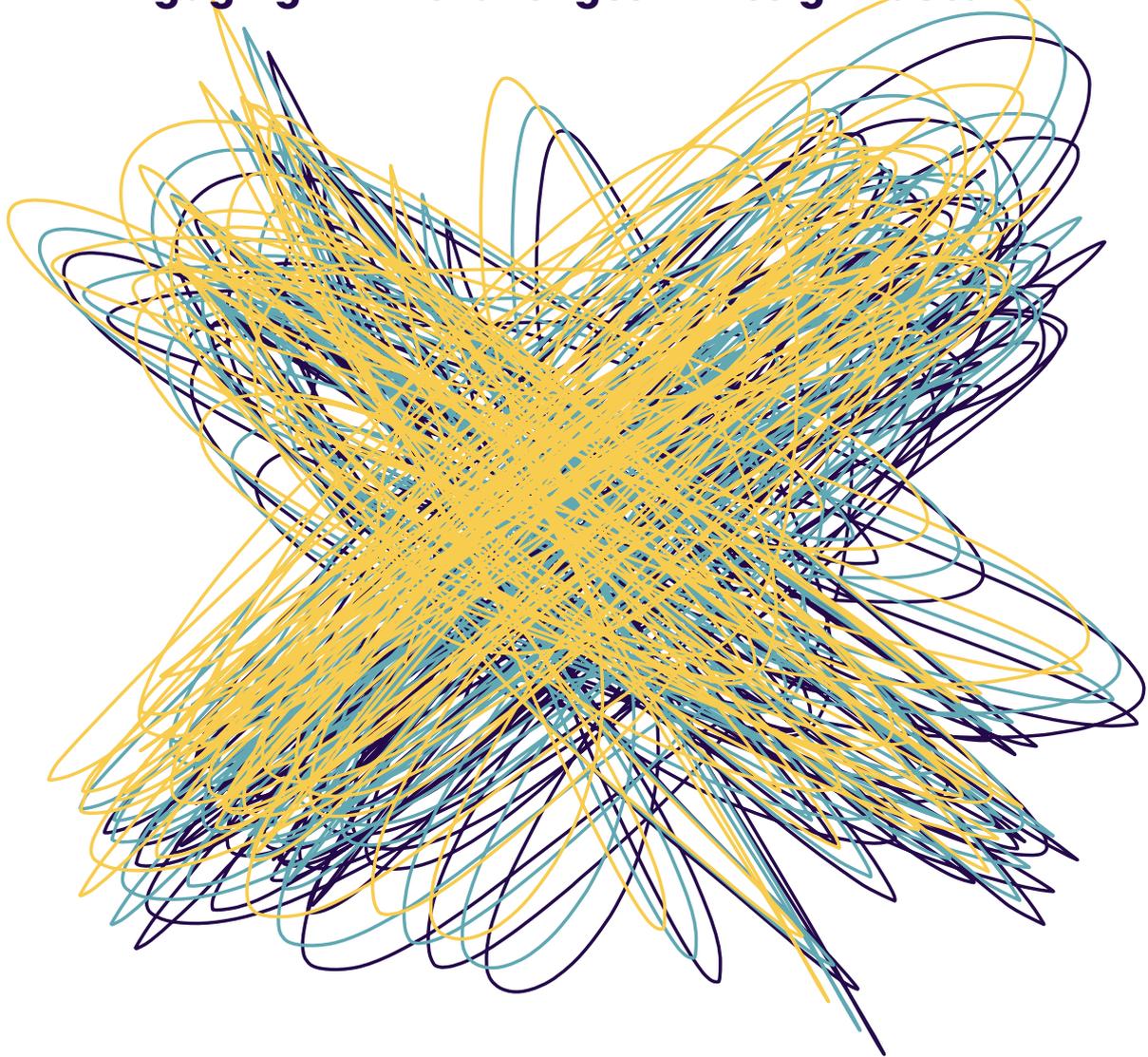


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## Section 03

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Alternative Problem Framing in Design Education: Moving Beyond 'Pain-Points'

## Track 03: Alternative Problem Framing in Design Education

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Problem Framing helps designers define issues they want to focus on and make issues more focused and addressable. In Industrial design, and several other design disciplines, designers use ‘pain points’ or points of friction in the user experience to support problem framing, and to elucidate areas where they can intervene and improve the experience of the person they are designing for. Many design challenges start with a search for ‘pain points’ that designers can solve. This is a specific and useful type of problem frame. However this can lead to an excessive focus on (and even fetishization of) the pain and distress of other people. There is also a tension around who defines the problem and why.

The focus on pain and deficit approaches can send problematic messaging about a community’s lived experience, reinforcing a one-dimensional portrayal of these people as depleted or broken (Leitão 2020; Tuck 2009). The ways in which issues are framed can depend on one’s positionality and point of view. In the same way that designers can choose to frame issues around pain points, they can also choose to frame issues with other starting points that are not pain and damage-centered.

For this track, we invited authors to share alternative framing that they were using in design education that did not start with a ‘painpoint’. The participants in this track were invited to:

- consider how world views impact problem framing
- examine issues of othering and unequal relationships of power in the framing activities of designers
- interrogate how problems and painpoints are defined and described, including who declares these as points of pain.
- share alternative methods of framing design problems that move away from damage and pain-centered approaches.
- share alternative approaches to framing that are grounded in questions around the future, utopia, happiness and other bold new approaches in design.
- share relevant culturally-situated practices such as ‘jugaad’ that may have alternative starting points

This track aimed to challenge current norms in ‘problem’ framing in design practice and education from Pre- K to PhD and beyond, and in both formal and informal education. The track sought to highlight alternative approaches by considering local epistemologies, critical and speculative approaches, fantasy, ‘make believe’ and games, as well as the role of happiness as a starting point in design. Three papers and two workshops were selected for this track.

In their paper, Christiansen and Gudiksen propose play-based strategies as a means of empathising with and understanding the issues that concern youth. It can be very difficult to connect with and understand young people between the ages of 14 - 17 years old after one has passed their age. They examine how play can be used to gain a better understanding of young people by unearthing hidden social problems that may affect their lives. The study stems from an emancipatory interest by the researchers in giving young people greater control in the research process, allowing the youth to determine what information they share during the research. They describe the experience of using the cultural probe method with ninth graders to understand



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their interests and needs. The research uncovered themes such as family, identity, relationships and creativity as key themes for the youth.

Von Lachmann, Couto and Portas also consider a youth perspective in their response to the call. In their paper they examine a research question that focuses on understanding how behaviours that are environmentally destructive and that have a negative impact on the quality of life can be changed. They provide a survey of environmental education-based activities that were conducted in Petropolis as examples of how engagement with nature can promote empathy and construct citizenship. They propose that a focus on protected areas and environmental concerns as an alternative way of framing issues could lead to the development of future agency and citizenship while promoting curiosity and the desire to learn.

Gieben-Gamal shares reflections on a case study about an undergraduate design course that sought to address deficit-based views of ageing as a problem that needs to be fixed. The course draws on critical and cultural gerontology and combines this with theory from action research and participatory design. The experience and empathy gap between the designer and the user who is older, prompted the creation of this course, the learning outcomes of which are not tied to the proposals of solution. Gieben-Gamal draws on literature to problematize the act of problem framing and solution proposing. The paper provides useful examples for other design educators on combining critical theory with design practice, on incorporating reflective practice as well as including much-needed discussions about power in design.

Sadowski and Hanrahan employ a sensory approach to alternative problem framing where participants, in the workshop that they lead, respond to a design prompt with exaggerated senses of smell, sight, taste, touch and feel. Sensory-focused ideation that is used in these workshops is meant to disrupt ordinary ways of thinking and nudge the participants towards new and unexpected ways of thinking about issues, while also creating an opportunity for participants to slow down and reflect on design activities.

In their workshop, Edwards and Korsmeyer prompt participants to reflect on the role of collaborative materials in design workshops. After discussing co-design materials, participants collaboratively create their own tools. One of the aims of this workshop is to encourage participants to think beyond the problem-solving aspect of design and to consider other roles for designers, as well as to collectively challenge and create new ways of framing and representing problems.

The contributions to this track reflect a diverse range of approaches targeted for different age groups such as issue framing strategies for children, youth and for older people. The papers also demonstrate non-pain-centered approaches to problem framing such as methods focused around play, environmental education, critical reflection, sensory experiences and co-design, collectively they provide rich models and examples of ways in which design educators can shift from a focus on pain and deficits and towards alternative ways of framing issues in design.

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