Whose Design Knowledge? Adapting the Culturally Responsive Curriculum Scorecard for Graphic Design Higher Education

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Abstract

Despite increasing calls to decolonise design education, most curricula have not been systematically examined. Formal curriculum documents, such as assessment briefs, lecture slides, visual references and prescribed readings, carry cultural assumptions about which designers matter, which design histories are legitimate and which design aesthetics are valued. This article makes these patterns visible by using the Culturally Responsive Curriculum Score Card (CRCS), a tool that was originally developed for high-school English language curricula. The CRCS was adapted to fit within Graphic Design higher education and was applied to a graphic design unit of study in Australia. Syllabus documents, design briefs, assessment rubrics, workshops, prescribed readings and seminar slides were examined across the scorecard's three domains: Representation, Social Justice Orientation and Teacher's Materials. The unit scored both Culturally Insufficient for Representation and Social Justice, and Emerging Awareness for Teacher's Materials. The analysis made 5 structural patterns visible: geographic concentration of exemplars, monolingual typographic normativity, assessment criteria rooted in unmarked cultural norms, cultural content present but unframed, and assumed rather than designed inclusivity. These patterns highlight how dominance is reproduced through omission rather than deliberate exclusion. The adapted CRCS can be transferred to other practice-based disciplines where canonical knowledge operates through visual and material systems.

Keywords: *culturally responsive teaching, graphic design education, curriculum analysis, scorecard, representation, higher education*

1. Introduction

Australian higher education classrooms are characterised by their cultural and linguistic diversity. Recent data shows that approximately a third (30.7%) of Australians were born overseas (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2023), and international student enrolments exceeded 840,000 (Department of Education 2024). Additionally, over 300 ethnic groups are represented, and about 21% of the population speaks a language other than English at home (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2023). Many of these students bring design knowledge shaped by non-European histories, non-Latin typographic traditions and diverse aesthetic conventions to the graphic design classroom. This trend is not only observable in Australia but is a global phenomenon. Similar demographic shifts are also occurring in other OECD countries (OECD 2025). However, the recruitment of culturally diverse students has often served as an internationalisation strategy, with the curriculum itself not being adapted or examined accordingly (Brewer and Leask 2012).

Graphic design education has been predominantly shaped by Bauhaus-derived pedagogical frameworks rooted in European design traditions (Holmes Miller 2023; Noel et al. 2023), operating within what Noel et al. (2023) consider a hegemonic frame of reference. This is consistent with further criticisms of the internationalisation of the curriculum, which point to the dominance of Western perspectives in the structuring and teaching of knowledge in higher education (Brewer and Leask 2012). This results in a discrepancy between who is in the classroom and what the curriculum recognises as valid knowledge (Apple 2012). Students whose design traditions, language, and visual systems are not acknowledged within the curriculum receive an implicit message that their expertise falls outside the disciplinary norm. This exclusion is often implicit rather than explicit, created through omission (Giroux 2020).

There is an increasing call within design scholarship for the decolonisation of design curricula (Abdulla, 2019; Tunstall, 2023; Holmes Miller, 2023; Pater, 2021). However, these discussions have mainly focused on teaching practice and/or pedagogical intent (Davis 2017; McCoy 2022). A more systematic analysis of the curriculum documents and artefacts, such as syllabi, briefs, seminar materials, reading lists and assessment rubrics, has received less attention (Sales 2023; Noel et al. 2023). These documents determine what content students encounter and what knowledge is legitimised before teaching takes place (Apple 2012; Darder 2012). The curriculum, thus, carries an implicit message of

which designers matter, which histories are legitimate and which visual traditions are foregrounded. When these structures are not being questioned, even a well-intentioned curriculum can reproduce dominance through omission.

Bryan-Gooden, Hester and Peoples (2019) developed a systematic approach, the Culturally Responsive Curriculum Scorecard (CRCS), to make these embedded messages visible. This tool was originally developed for the K–9 English Language Arts curriculum. This article reports on an application of the adapted CRCS to one unit of study at one Australian institution. It presents findings across three domains, identifies five structural patterns as diagnostic indicators for curriculum review, and examines the implications of these patterns for student belonging and for curriculum design practice.

2. Theoretical Framing

The study draws on Culturally Responsive Teaching and Critical Pedagogy as an analytical lens to examine how knowledge is constructed, legitimised and reproduced within the education setting. Apple (2012) argues that curriculum decisions are not technical but ideological in nature and reflect social and political interests which determine whose knowledge is selected, valued and taught. Giroux (2020) expands this with the concept of the hidden curriculum, which describes how educational institutions implicitly convey values, norms and assumptions through what knowledge is included and what is omitted. These omissions are not accidental but function as a power mechanism that privileges certain traditions and renders others invisible.

Darder (2012) claims that the curriculum is a site of cultural reproduction where dominant ideologies are transmitted through materials, structures and pedagogical assumptions. This perspective is supported by hooks (1994), who argues that education can operate as a site of dominance, particularly when one cultural perspective is placed at the centre as universal, it silences marginalised communities.

Culturally responsive teaching (Gay 2018) offers a pedagogical response to these structural conditions. Gay (2018) argues that teaching becomes culturally responsive when it acknowledges the cultural knowledge that students bring with them and incorporates it into curriculum content, teaching practice, and assessment. Ladson-Billings (1995) also understands cultural relevance as a pedagogical principle that places students' experiences at the centre rather than treating them as secondary.

When curriculum structures exclude students' cultural knowledge, the effects extend beyond content learning. Walton and Cohen (2007) argue that students of socially stigmatised groups experience *belonging uncertainty* in academic contexts: uncertainty about the quality of their social bonds and heightened sensitivity to issues of social belonging. Gopalan and Brady (2020) confirm that minoritised students report lower belonging, which predicts persistence, engagement and mental health.

Understanding how curriculum documents create these conditions requires a systematic examination of what they include and exclude. The Culturally Responsive Curriculum Scorecard (Bryan-Gooden, Hester, and Peoples 2019) provides a method for making visible what Apple (2012) describes as ideological curriculum decisions and what Giroux (2020) identifies as the hidden curriculum. Developed within a CRT framework, the CRCS interrogates the extent to which these documents reflect or exclude diverse perspectives. This study adapts this instrument for higher education in graphic design, applying it to curriculum documents that have not previously been subjected to such analysis.

3. Method

This study uses document analysis as its primary qualitative method. Bowen (2009) describes document analysis as an iterative process that combines elements of content and thematic analysis and involves skimming, in-depth reading, and interpreting institutional documents. Documents are not to be treated as complete records of facts but rather interrogated in terms of their meaning and contribution to the research questions (Bowen 2009). In this study, curriculum documents, including syllabi, design briefs, seminar materials, and required reading, are treated as artifacts that convey institutional values and disciplinary norms even before teaching takes place. The analytical tool applied to these documents is the CRCS (Bryan-Gooden, Hester, and Peoples 2019), which examines the curriculum in three key areas: representation, social justice, and teacher's materials. Since the tool was developed for an English Language Curriculum, the original statements focused on narrative, texts, character portrayals, and primary/secondary literature context, which required an adaptation to fit within graphic design higher education.

Each statement was examined for its transferability across the three domains. Within Representation, character-based language was replaced with designers, case studies, typographic systems, and cultural frames of reference. In the area of Social justice, the statements were adapted to determine whether

the curriculum situates design as embedded within power structure, whether multiple cultural frames of reference are recognised as equally valid, and whether design practice is linked to real-world social contexts. Statements within Teacher's Materials were shifted from teachers in school settings and literacy-related curricula to design educators and studio-based teaching materials.

In this study, the researcher examined whether the documents provided guidance for teachers on cultural positioning, bias in critique, and the recognition of students' prior cultural knowledge. Items were classified as non-transferable if their content was specifically geared toward narrative fiction or character-based literacy instruction and lacked a functional equivalent in studio-based design education. Items were classified as transferable if the underlying principle (e.g. whether diverse knowledge systems are positioned as equivalent) could be meaningfully assessed within curriculum documents in graphic design, even if the specific wording required adaptation (Table 1). Statements that were determined redundant or not transferrable were removed. Those that remained applicable were retained unchanged.

Adapted	Adapted statement	Original source items	Adaptation rationale
RE1	Case studies and examples used in class draw from culturally and geographically diverse contexts, and avoid homogenising or ambiguous representations.	1. The curriculum features visually diverse characters, and the characters of color do not all look alike. / 3. Diverse ethnicities and nationalities are portrayed – not all Asian families are Chinese, not all Latinx families are Mexican, etc. / 13. Diverse characters are rooted in their own cultures and are not ambiguous.	Reframed from fictional characters to design case studies and exemplars. The concern with characters not all looking alike (item 1) and diverse nationalities (item 3) became a requirement for geographic and cultural diversity in design examples. The anti-ambiguity requirement from item 13 was retained directly.
SJ6	The curriculum encourages students to design strategies that are inclusive of diverse cultural perspectives and lived experiences.	19. The curriculum presents different points of view on the same event or experience, especially points of view from marginalized people/communities.	Reframed from presenting multiple perspectives on events to designing inclusive strategies. The design-specific application replaces the narrative framing.
TM1	Teaching materials and curricular artefacts reflect contributions from staff of diverse identities, acknowledging how representation in authorship shapes classroom culture.	22. The authors of the teachers' materials are people of diverse identities (race/ethnicity, gender, other identities if possible).	Retained and expanded. "Authors" became "staff" to reflect the higher education context. The clause about representation shaping classroom culture makes explicit a concern implicit in the original.

Table 1. Examples of adaptation

Each item was examined through two rounds of scoring using the scorecard's rubric bands, with a written justification for each score. The CRCS uses a four-point scoring system ranging from +2 (Very Satisfied: clear evidence of intentional CRT design) through +1 (Satisfied: some CRT elements present) and –1 (Unclear: minimal or ambiguous evidence) to –2 (Not Satisfied: little or no consideration of CRT principles). Scores were then aggregated across items for each domain to generate domain-level scores. When an item was ambiguous during scoring, the decision was based on whether the curriculum document contained explicit, structural evidence rather than whether it could theoretically be met through individual teaching practice. This was a necessary distinction, since the scorecard captures what the curriculum conveys as a written artifact, not what might occur in classroom practice. It should also be noted that the researcher is a lecturer of the unit under investigation, which allowed for detailed familiarity with the curriculum materials and their application context; however, it also carries the risk of normalising existing structures. To counteract this, the scoring was solely based on the rubric criteria and not the researcher's own teaching experience or intent. All justifications were documented to allow for external review.

4. Findings

The examined curriculum scored in the following ranges:

Domain	Score / Classification
Representation	–6 / Culturally Insufficient
Social Justice	–7 / Culturally Insufficient
Teacher Materials	+1 / Emerging Awareness

Table 2. Scores across the three domains of the adapted CRCS.

Representation and Social Justice both scored within the Culturally Insufficient range, which indicates limited structural alignment with culturally responsive teaching principles. The Teaching Materials domain, in contrast, achieved a score within the Emerging Awareness range. Place-based tasks and flexible design outcomes provided a certain foundation; however, there was limited guidance on positioning, cultural differences, critical analysis and teacher positionality. Beyond the numerical scores, the curriculum analysis generated five structural patterns that appeared across all three domains. The following patterns are not only presented as case-specific findings but also as diagnostic indicators that curriculum designers and program coordinators in practice-based disciplines can use to examine their own curriculum documents.

4.1 Pattern 1: Geographic Concentration of Exemplars

Diagnostic question: *Do the case studies, visual references, and historical content in your curriculum draw from more than one geographic and cultural tradition?*
The curriculum under investigation drew heavily on examples from European, North American and Australian designers, with a recurring focus on modernism, Bauhaus and Swiss International Style principles. The analysis revealed a focus on culturally dominant design references, with a scarcity of representation of Indigenous, migrant, queer or working-class communities. Instead, target audiences were mainly framed as English-speaking, urban and middle-class. Designers of colour, women, and gender-diverse designers were almost entirely absent from core teaching materials and only appeared sporadically in supplementary resources. Designers from Africa, South America, South Asia, East Asia and Indigenous cultures were not represented. The dominance of canonical white male designers reduced students' opportunities to encounter other design perspectives that align with their own identities or cultural backgrounds. Historical content followed a Euro-American trajectory and neglected alternative design histories and Indigenous or diasporic traditions. This geographical narrowing was not only evident within Representation but also within Social Justice, where non-dominant populations were not represented through a strengths-based perspective, and opportunities to make cultural expertise or community-specific knowledge visible were minimal. Where a curriculum draws its exemplars predominantly from a singular geographical perspective or cultural cluster, it becomes the primary frame of reference for design learning regardless of the diversity of its student cohort.

4.2 Pattern 2: Monolingual Typographic Normativity

Diagnostic question: *Does your curriculum engage with non-Latin scripts and multilingual design practice as structured content, or only incidentally?*
Visual reference in seminar slides and case studies predominantly focused on modernist and minimalist typographic traditions in English and Latin scripts. Non-Latin writing systems such as Arabic, Devanagari, Hangul or Kanji were only mentioned in passing, without any structural introduction to multi-lingual or culturally specific typographic systems. Therefore, bi-scriptural design practices were not addressed. This pattern was visible across all three CRSC domains. There was no guidance for teachers or students on how to address and work with non-dominant typographic systems. Indigenous language systems were completely absent from the curriculum. Given that students bring multilingual competencies and knowledge of diverse typographic traditions, the exclusive focus on Latin typography conveyed a normative stance on which languages are recognised as a valid source of design knowledge.

4.3 Pattern 3: Assessment Criteria Rooted in Unmarked Cultural Norms

Diagnostic question: *Do your assessment criteria and evaluative language name the cultural and aesthetic tradition they derive from?*

Assessment rubrics and criteria defined quality through terms such as “professional”, “polished”, or “grid-aligned” without addressing that these terms reflect a specific cultural tradition. These design criteria and norms, which are based within a culturally dominant framework, function as an unmarked quality standard. Thereby, student work that uses a culturally dominant or culturally diverse design tradition is measured against a single tradition. This is exacerbated by a lack of guidance for teachers on addressing their own bias and assumptions in assessments and critiques, or on questioning whose quality standards are applied and whose are denied. This leads to critique protocols based on “professional standards” that fail to consider how dominant aesthetics disadvantage underrepresented students who design outside the dominant cultural norm. Without naming the cultural origin of evaluative language, students from other aesthetic traditions encounter criteria that appear neutral but have a normative effect.

4.4 Pattern 4: Cultural Content Present but Unframed

Diagnostic question: *Where cultural engagement opportunities exist, are they explicitly framed as cultural content and linked to learning outcomes?*
Whereas the curriculum allowed for cultural engagement and expression there was no framing or guidance on what cultural frameworks were being engaged. Several assignments allowed students to draw on their own cultural backgrounds and choose target audiences and contexts that align with their own cultural backgrounds. However, this was not linked to formal learning outcomes and was not reinforced through prompts, analytical tools, or examples. This meant the potential for cultural integration relied on students’ own initiative rather than being supported by formal curricular documents that could have helped to link cultural meaning to design decisions. Individual reading activities, such as a reading on design ethics, encouraged reflection on industry norms. However, these instances were not woven throughout the course materials and remained isolated learning experiences. This pattern continued into the teaching materials, where isolated prompts invited reflections on personal experiences but were not embedded more systematically. Without explicit frameworks, culturally relevant content cannot be systematically developed, and student learning cannot be assessed or linked to outcomes. Identifying cultural content as such is a prerequisite for pedagogical effectiveness.

4.5 Pattern 5: Assumed Rather than Designed Inclusivity

Diagnostic question: *Does your curriculum explicitly design conditions for cultural responsiveness, or does it assume that task flexibility will produce inclusive outcomes?*
The curriculum design supported place-based learning and task flexibility. Some assessment tasks were linked to local contexts with flexible deliverables. These options were outlined within the assessment structure; however, it was not addressed how culturally specific methods could be integrated within assessment tasks, nor how they could be recognised as a formal outcome. The analysed unit of study did not provide any guidance for teachers on how to address cultural sensitivity or reflect on cultural assumptions. Culturally responsive teaching was possible within the curriculum structure but required teachers to enact these principles independently, as the written curriculum did not consistently provide the necessary conditions. Therefore, responsiveness functioned as an individual responsibility, not as an institutional design decision.

5. Implications for Teaching and Student Learning

The five patterns identified in this study are not attributed to individual bias. Instead, they are embedded in curricular documents, which exist independently of individual teaching decisions. The scorecard made these conditions visible, not because they are hidden, but because they are default assumptions within the curriculum as a designed artifact.

5.1 Implications for Students

The scores for Representation (–6) and Social Justice (–7), both classified as Culturally Insufficient, indicate that the curriculum does not create conditions for what Gay (2018) defines as culturally responsive teaching: teaching that acknowledges the cultural knowledge students bring and incorporates it into curriculum content, practice and assessment. When the curriculum excludes students’ cultural knowledge (Gay 2018), it signals whose knowledge is valid within the discipline. Walton and Cohen (2007) argue that students from minority groups perceive such exclusion as

uncertainty about their place, questioning whether “people like me belong here” (p. 83). Gopalan and Brady (2020) empirically confirm that underrepresented minority and first-generation students at four-year institutions report a lower sense of belonging. In graphic design education, such signals of belonging are enacted through studio-based critique, visual references and assessment criteria, even before teaching takes place.

Geographic concentration of exemplars (Pattern 1) and monolingual typographic normativity (Pattern 2) signal whose design traditions are treated as disciplinary knowledge. Assessment criteria rooted in unmarked cultural norms (Pattern 3) position students working from non-Eurocentric visual traditions against a standard that does not name the tradition from which it originates. Their work is not read as an alternative approach but rather measured as deficient. Where cultural content exists but is unframed and unlinked to learning outcomes (Pattern 4), students from non-dominant traditions must do additional, unrecognised work to locate themselves within the curriculum. Thomas and Quinlan (2023) demonstrate that minoritised students in higher education perceive their curriculum as less culturally sensitive than their majority peers, and this perception accounts for lower teacher interactions and interest. Kahu and Nelson (2018) identify belonging as one of four psychosocial mechanisms that mediate student engagement. If belonging is undermined by the curriculum itself, the effects extend to self-efficacy and academic outcomes.

In a multicultural country like Australia, not only international but also local students bring diverse design knowledge from non-European histories and non-Latin typographic traditions to the classroom. Universities recruit this diversity as part of their internationalisation strategy (Brewer and Leask 2012). They then place these students in a curriculum consisting of teaching artifacts that do not acknowledge the design traditions and knowledge that diversity represents. Prior research has identified the tension between pedagogical intent and teaching practices (Abdulla 2019; Tunstall 2023; Noel et al. 2023); however, the contribution of this study lies in the empirical evidence for how this tension is embedded in curriculum documents themselves. The results of the scorecard demonstrate that the signals students receive are not necessarily produced by individual teaching decisions but are embedded within the curriculum itself.

5.2 Implications for Curriculum Design and Delivery

Each pattern identifies a condition that constrains teaching practice and requires action at the level of curriculum design and institutional resource allocation. Design educators typically enter teaching from professional practice rather than through formal pedagogical training (Davis 2017; Cezzar 2020). The written curriculum, therefore, functions as their primary pedagogical framework. When that framework has not been examined for its cultural positioning, the teacher inherits its assumptions.

Pattern 5 (assumed rather than designed inclusivity) directly frames this limitation. The Teacher’s Materials domain scored +1 (Emerging Awareness), indicating that while some structural foundations existed, the curriculum offered no guidance on cultural positioning, bias in critique, or recognition of students’ prior cultural knowledge. Culturally responsive teaching was possible within the curricular structure but was not systematically supported. This could lead to inconsistency across a teaching team and make students’ access to culturally responsive teaching contingent on which instructor they are assigned to.

The remaining patterns specify what structural support would be needed. Geographic concentration of exemplars (Pattern 1) requires investment in sourcing and curating materials from a broader range of traditions. Furthermore, attention must be paid to the composition of curriculum development teams, as a culturally homogeneous team tends to reproduce the same frame of reference. Monolingual typographic normativity (Pattern 2) requires expertise in non-Latin typographic systems, which may not exist within the current teaching team. This necessitates either staffing investment or targeted professional development. Assessment criteria rooted in unmarked norms (Pattern 3) require programme-wide revision of rubrics and learning outcomes. Such a change cannot be made unilaterally by an individual teacher.

Unframed cultural content (Pattern 4) requires curriculum documents to identify cultural material as such and connect it to learning outcomes. The CRCS provides a systematic evaluation of existing curriculum documents, while Thomas and Quinlan (2024) developed an educator self-reflection tool that supports individual educators in recognising and addressing cultural assumptions in their own teaching materials. Used in conjunction, these instruments could support curriculum review at both programmatic and individual levels. However, their effectiveness depends on institutional commitment to embedding them in curriculum review processes.

These conditions cannot be addressed through a single revision. Leask (2015) argues that internationalisation of the curriculum requires sustained institutional commitment, disciplinary expertise, and continuous engagement with changing contexts. Marantz-Gal and Leask (2020) reinforce this, arguing that constant shifts in institutional and disciplinary contexts mean that regular review and reconstitution of the curriculum should be a priority. However, such commitment presupposes empirical documentation of the structural conditions embedded in curriculum documents themselves. Existing calls for the decolonisation of design curricula have focused on what should change (Abdulla 2019; Tunstall 2023; Holmes Miller 2023). This study contributes a documented account of what specific structural conditions need to change, at what level, and with what resource implications. The five patterns, derived from a systematic analysis of curriculum documents rather than from pedagogical intent, provide an empirical basis for curriculum review in graphic design and potentially in other practice-based disciplines where disciplinary norms are transmitted through canonical examples, material traditions and studio-based assessment.

The adapted CRCS makes the question “Whose design knowledge?” empirically answerable. While existing calls for decolonisation identify what should change, this study documents what currently exists in curriculum documents and the structural conditions that maintain it. The five patterns provide evidence of what Apple (2012) describes as ideological curriculum decisions: decisions that determine whose knowledge is taught, whose traditions are centred, and whose design expertise is positioned as disciplinary norm.

6. Limitations

Document analysis captures the curriculum as a written, fixed structure and not its implementation in teaching practice. Actual teaching practice may exceed or fall short of what the curriculum prescribes. Likewise, culturally responsive practices may occur in the classroom without being explicitly stated in the written materials. The scorecard results thus reflect the structural conditions created by the curriculum, not the full spectrum of student experience.

This study examined a single course at one institution, and the scoring was conducted by a single researcher. The adapted tool has not yet been tested in different contexts or by multiple assessors. Further research is needed to test the instrument in other design programs, at other institutions, and in other practice-based disciplines, and to determine whether multiple assessors produce consistent results.

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