

Sheffield Hallam University

Decolonising Design Education: Assembling Caring Futures

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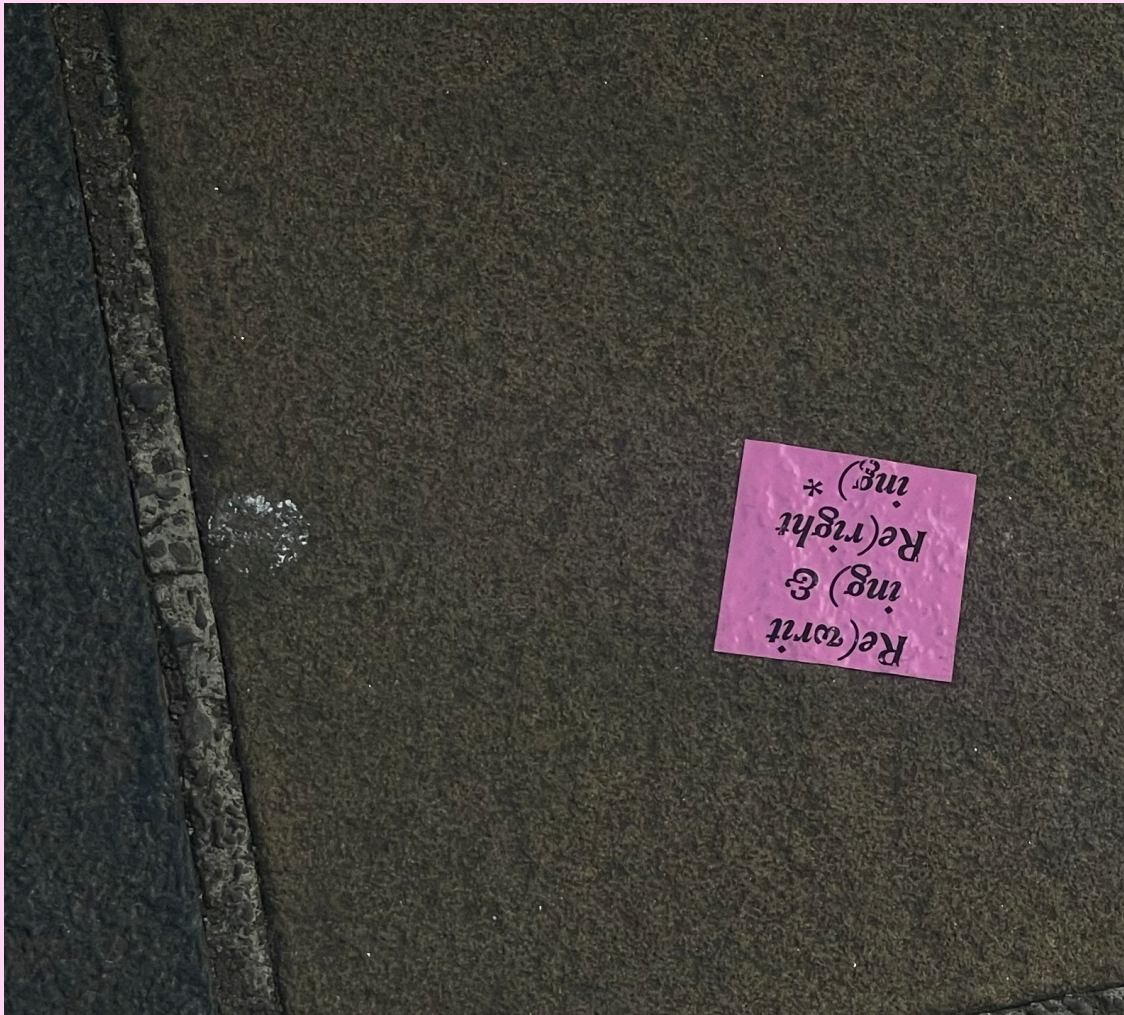
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A creative journalling exercise & extension of practice

Layla Gharib

A Creative Journal on Facilitating Encounters Towards Decolonisation



A conference sticker on the floor found a week later

This journal is not a report. It's a record of atmosphere, labour, and the small, persistent traces left on bodies, rooms, and screens. It sits alongside my PhD on decolonising design education but leans into a different register: part field note, part love letter, part rehearsal for futures that don't yet have a timetable.

I curated two departmental conferences—Re(writing) & Re(righting) and Brave Spaces—not as sites of data collection, but as live interventions. I didn't ask colleagues or students to become research participants; I asked them to become co-makers of conditions. What follows, then, is written from my situated vantage point—as curator, facilitator, designer, and tired pair of hands—attentive to the textures that academic accounts usually smooth out: the slowness of the risograph drum, the comfort of a sticker unexpectedly spotted on a colleague's water bottle months later, the hush before a room decides whether it will be brave today.

Re(Writing) & Re(Righting) ing



+



Brave Spaces

A year a part, two days happened...

2023

The first gathering, **Re(writing) & Re(righting)**, asked what happens when a departmental conference resists polish, resists hierarchy, and instead becomes a space for retelling, repairing, and imagining otherwise. Inspired by Linda Tuhiwai Smith's framing, it was about retelling stories of design education while re-righting the exclusions that still shape them. It carried a softness in its aesthetic, a plurality in its programme, and a commitment to care as infrastructure rather than sentiment.

2024

The second gathering, **Brave Spaces**, grew directly out of the first. Where the earlier event centred on rewriting narratives and re-righting exclusions, this one turned more fully toward the relational and affective: what does bravery mean in pedagogy? How do we sustain discomfort without closure? How can care and courage live together in the same room? Brave Spaces leaned into boldness and risk, not as heroic acts but as shared vulnerability and collective responsibility..

This journal will now navigate the two days as separate strands. Each will be given its own space, its own rhythm, its own traces of memory and labour.

Re(Writ ing) & Re(Right ing

The first gathering began quietly, almost tentatively. It wasn't designed as a research encounter, and it wasn't meant to be a polished conference. It was something in between: a curated pause in the department, a day to notice what usually slips through, to re(write) and to re(right).

The title itself came from Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2021) — rewriting and re-righting as twin gestures: retelling stories from the margins, and repairing the exclusions those stories have lived through. Translating that into a departmental setting meant asking: what if a conference didn't just reproduce academic hierarchies but unsettled them? What if it felt more like a rehearsal than a performance? The atmosphere was shaped as much by texture as by content. With Azizah Raghil, a paid student collaborator, I worked through long afternoons of risograph ink and paper-cutting. We leaned into imperfection: soft palettes, cursive typefaces, smudges that carried the hand's trace. It mattered that this wasn't sleek branding but care as aesthetic. When the posters went up, when the programmes were folded, I wanted people to feel they were entering a space held differently.

On the day, the programme stretched in multiple directions: workshops, provocations, unfinished thoughts, creative experiments. There were papers, yes, but they shared space with quieter interventions. Care wasn't a theme pasted on top — it was the infrastructure. From the way contributions were invited, to the arrangement of chairs, to the small gestures (stickers, hand-outs) that gave the day a tactile memory.

2023

Azizah and I stood side by side at the risograph, watching the rollers spit out sheets with their stubborn misalignments. Too much pressure, not enough ink, a blur where a letter should have been crisp.

And yet — that was the point. The smudge was part of the language. Cursive typefaces leaned into softness, a quiet resistance to the hard edges of “professional” design culture. The colours refused to shout but still asked for attention. Every texture said: care lives here.

I remember Azizah laughing as we peeled stacks of misprints off the drying rack. Hours of folding, cutting, reprinting. The labour wasn't efficient, but it was relational. A visual identity made through conversation, through heritage entanglements, through slow co-creation. It didn't just decorate the event; it set its rhythm.



The Program ming



I wanted the programme to feel not like those academic conferences where polished papers dominate, voices of authority fill the room, and students are often positioned as spectators rather than contributors. That format has always felt like it was reinforcing the same hierarchies I was trying to unsettle. So instead of neat panels and keynote slots, I opened the call wide: workshops, provocations, unfinished ideas, creative experiments. Yes, there was still space for papers, but they were part of a wider mix, not the default centrepiece. The point wasn't to abandon academic form altogether, but to loosen its grip and create room for knowledge to be shared in multiple registers.

I also invited two external keynotes to frame the day: **Vanessa (Ve) Dewey** and **Anne H. Berry**. Their selection was intentional, I wanted their two voices in the same room because they stretched the conversation across scales — from the intimate dynamics of inclusion in the classroom, to the systemic infrastructures of leadership and representation in the field.

The day began with Vanessa (Ve) Dewey, whose keynote was called Design Leadership: Embracing a Humanistic and Inclusive Approach. She spoke with the kind of grounded confidence that comes from moving between very different worlds — from Mattel and Adobe, to research at the Helen Hamlyn Centre for Design. Her talk was a quiet dismantling of the leadership models many of us have inherited in design: hierarchical, competitive, extractive. The kind that celebrate authority but rarely make space for care. Instead, she framed leadership as something relational and humanistic — about creating conditions for others to thrive, about authenticity, about inclusivity as daily practice rather than lofty principle.

For our department, where conversations about decolonisation often circle around curricula or representation, this felt like a shift. Dewey reminded us that leadership isn't just an abstract administrative category; it's embodied in the everyday. It lives in how meetings are chaired, how students are supported, how staff are invited to bring their full selves into the room. Her opening gave us a way to think about leadership not as power over, but as care-with. It was both a critique of old models and an invitation to rehearse something different.



The Program ming

The programme came together through both an open call and a few targeted invitations. I wanted it to feel porous, open to experiment — a space for half-formed ideas, provocations, and creative interventions, not just polished papers. The call made this clear: bring us something in progress, something risky, something you can't always fit into conventional formats.

I also reached out to colleagues whose work I knew already resonated with the ethos of rewriting and re-righting. The balance mattered: I wanted grassroots energy, but also threads of inquiry that were already more developed. Together, they created a deliberately uneven texture — a patchwork that resisted uniformity.

The day unfolded as a mix of formats. Workshops surfaced and critiqued the cultures shaping our department (Levick-Parkin), explored how care circulates through academic practice (Ellis, Corazzo & myself), and turned student proposals into present-tense interventions (Gharib).

Marie Judge's session, *Ten Briefs for the Foundation Year*, slowed us down at the point of entry into higher education. She asked what the very first assignments could do differently: how they might signal care, build confidence, and make students feel like they belong from the start.

Papers exposed the invisible labour and tacit structures that underpin our teaching (Shaw & Ray; Blejerman).

Hestia Peppe's contribution unsettled assumptions of academic reading altogether, treating ADHD not as a deficit but as a generative methodology — tuning, spinning, moving sideways rather than in neat linear order.

Discussions and provocations turned to silence, microaggressions, and referencing practices as live sites of exclusion and possibility (Bateman; Blejerman). This heterogeneity was no accident. It was my way of enacting in form what the event proposed in content: plurality, care, and disruption of inherited hierarchies.



One of the most significant moments came from JJ Eteson, our student representative, who asked three questions that seemed to distil the whole day:

How can we learn from and with students?

What do we need to build and maintain strong networks to support each other?

What do we need to create safe spaces?

Hearing those words from a student unsettled the usual dynamic of departmental conferences. It shifted the vantage point: instead of talking about students, we were reminded to listen to them, to reframe our decisions through their eyes. JJ's intervention made it clear that decolonial condition-making is not just about inclusive curricula but about the infrastructures of reciprocity and care that hold us together.

The
keynote
that
didn't
happen





Anne H. Berry was supposed to be with us. Her keynote, *Finding an Equilibrium: Redefining Inclusive Design Education in a Post-Pandemic Landscape*, would have brought a perspective our department rarely hears: a clear-eyed account of how Black designers have been erased from history and curricula, and how inclusion has to be lived as a structural commitment, not just a reaction to crisis. I was excited for our students and colleagues to hear her voice in the room. When it became clear she couldn't attend, it felt like a genuine loss. Her absence left a gap that no substitution could fill. But the programme needed to move forward. Rather than pretending nothing had changed, I decided to acknowledge the rupture. I went back to the slide that had framed the whole event — dismantling exclusion, building frameworks of care, cultivating brave spaces — and read those commitments aloud. Then I asked the room three questions:

What might a brave space look like in your context?

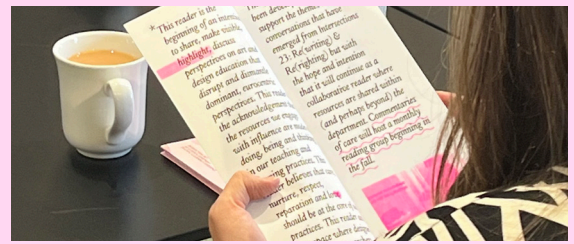
How are, or how might we be, “marching” in our teaching?

What might it mean to shift from activism to actionism?

The dialogue that followed was uneven, halting, at times uncomfortable. But in that discomfort something important surfaced. Colleagues spoke about the difficulty of sustaining bravery inside assessment-driven cultures. Others named the vulnerability of bringing their full selves into classrooms. Some simply sat in the silence, letting it hang.

It wasn't the keynote I had hoped for — It was something else entirely: a collective holding of the absence, a willingness to stay with the gap and see what conversations might emerge there. In retrospect, that moment shaped the day in ways I hadn't anticipated. Not by making up for what was missing, but by showing us that sometimes bravery looks like acknowledging the loss, and still choosing to speak — together, imperfectly — into the space it leaves behind.

Commentaries of Care



Midway through the day I laid out stacks of risograph-printed readers: *Commentaries of Care*: A reader that compiled perspectives on art and design education that centralised working (nurturing) towards a sustainable, caring and inclusive art and design education. Modest in form — folded pages, soft textures, slightly misaligned ink — but carrying more than paper.

The reader wasn't conceived as a polished publication, more as an offering of the readings I was engaging with. It was a beginning. A living resource that could be added to, re-circulated, reshaped. What made it most alive was that it didn't stop at the handout. Alongside it, I launched a reading group — with an Instagram page, a sign-up sheet, and a mailing list. People left the conference not only with a booklet in their bags, but also an invitation to keep meeting, to read together slowly, to extend the day into an ongoing practice.

For me, this was crucial. Too often conferences flare up and disappear, leaving behind little more than memories. The reader — and the group it seeded — was a way to resist that ephemerality. It gave the conversations a body, a rhythm, and a future.

It became both document and practice: a reader that travelled, and a group that gathered. For a time, those meetings carried forward what the conference had rehearsed — a slower, collective way of being together. Even when the group later struggled against the speed of academic life, the attempt itself mattered.

Commentaries of Care wasn't an end point. It was a start — a way of saying these conversations don't stop when the chairs are stacked and the rooms are empty. They continue, provisionally, through pages, through gatherings, through care held in common.

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art and
education

commentaries of care*

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The labour of Care

Curating Re(writing) & Re(righting) was joyful — but it was also exhausting. The day didn't simply assemble itself. It was held together by a web of visible and invisible tasks: drafting calls and descriptors, preparing slides, chasing sign-ups on Eventbrite, arranging catering, booking and setting up rooms, printing and folding programmes. At the same time, there was the aesthetic work: posters, holding screens, risograph prints, the little touches that gave the event its atmosphere.

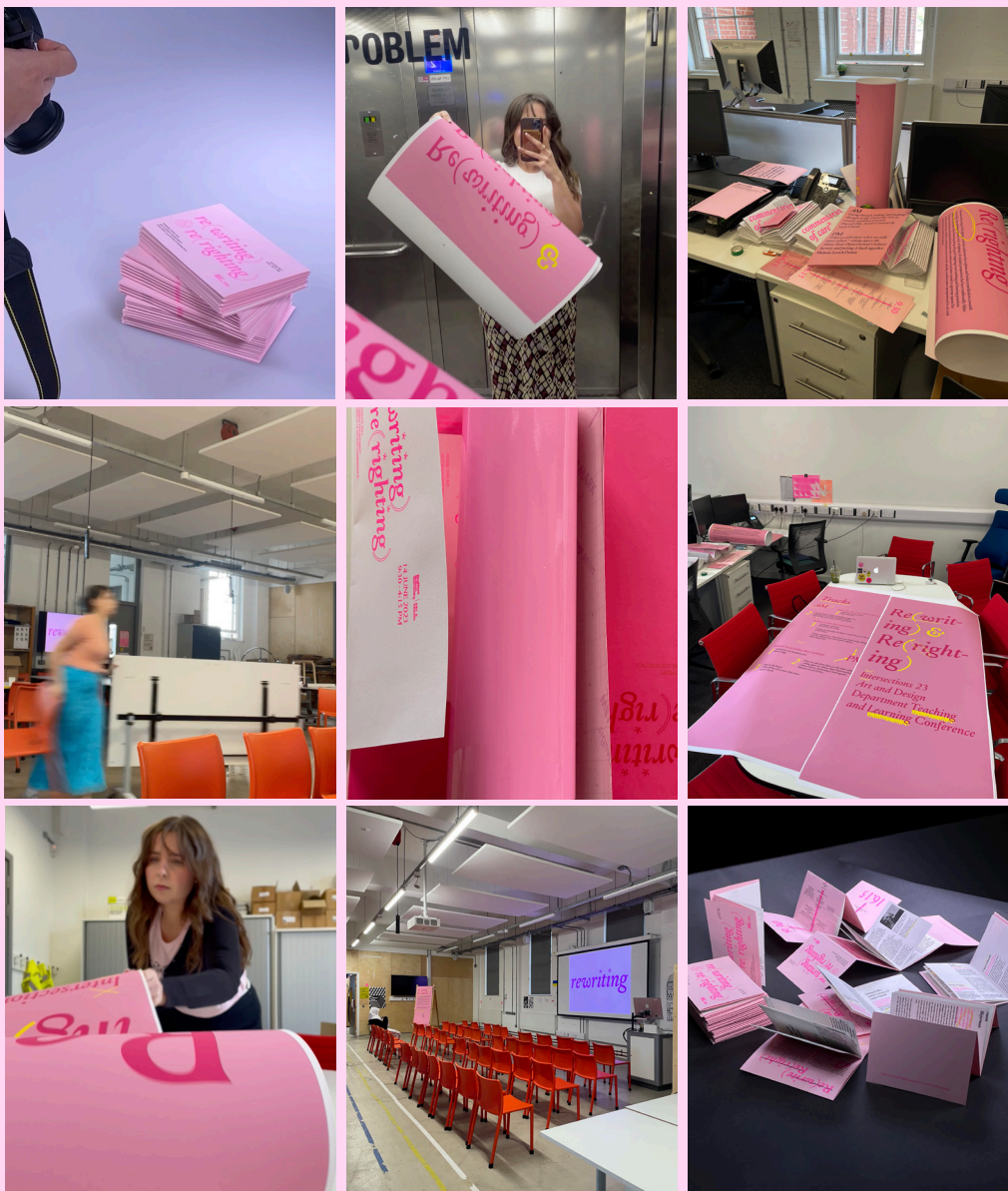
Feminist scholars have long reminded us that this kind of labour — affective, logistical, relational — is essential yet consistently undervalued in academia. And yet, without it, nothing would have happened. For me, the process was both exhilarating and draining: the satisfaction of seeing something aligned with my research commitments come alive, and the toll of sustaining all the unseen infrastructures that made it possible.

I wanted that labour to be visible. So I gathered a collage of photographs from the run-up: scraps of cut paper, piles of misprints, ink-stained risograph sheets, tables half-set, endless lists on my laptop. These aren't the images that usually appear in official accounts, but they are the ones that show the work. Including them felt important — a way of situating this conference within a feminist lineage that insists such work is political, material, and worthy of recognition.



The labour of care also lived in the smallest details. I designed stickers for the event — simple, modest things, but carrying the conference identity in tangible form. Months later I'd see them on water bottles or laptops, quiet reminders that the day had left a trace, not just in memory but woven into daily life. These fragments mattered. They testified to the persistence of care — the idea that an event, with all its labour and intensity, doesn't simply disappear when the chairs are stacked away. It lingers, softly, in the everyday.

Re(writing) & Re(righting) was never just a departmental conference. It was a live experiment in condition-making — where care was enacted not only through the programme and its aesthetics, but also through the invisible scaffolding that held the day together. Yet its very intensity raised the question: how do such gestures endure? How do we stop them dissolving as soon as they end?



Ok now let's fastforward a year to Brave Spaces — >

If Re(writing) & Re(righting) was about narratives — rewriting them, re-righting them — then Brave Spaces shifted the focus. This second gathering, a year later turned toward the relational, the affective, the collective. Less about texts and structures on paper, more about the atmospheres we live through, the encounters that shape pedagogy in practice.

I curated the day as a one-day teaching and learning conference, not to deliver neat answers but to rehearse: how might brave pedagogies actually be staged, embodied, enacted in the moment? As before, it wasn't about collecting data but about testing theoretical commitments — that decolonising design education is as much about making conditions where multiple epistemologies can flourish as it is about diversifying curricula.

Staff and students stood alongside each other on the programme. Contributions came in multiple registers. And together we asked: what does it mean to bring your whole self into a space? To name the constraints that weigh on us? To take the risk of imagining futures otherwise?



Brave Spaces



2024
(One Year
Later)



Atmosphere, Aesthetics & Condition- Making

The atmosphere of Brave Spaces didn't just happen; it was carefully built. Once again, I worked with Azizah Raghieb — a paid student assistant funded by the department to support student work to create the programmes visual identity. Together we shaped a language that carried the themes of bravery, plurality and decolonial practice into form. We paired bold display fonts with flowing cursive scripts — declarations sitting alongside quieter gestures. Typography became more than style; it became metaphor, insisting that bravery needs both the loud and the tender, the forceful and the fragile.

The material decisions extended this ethos. We chose risograph again, leaning into its imperfections: textures slightly off, layers misaligned, edges not quite neat. But this time the colours were bolder, unapologetic, claiming space. I began to think of this as a brave aesthetic — tactile, unpolished, but insistent. Large asterisks scattered through the printed matter disrupted the smooth neutrality of academic design, punctuating the day with reminders to pause, notice, attend.

This visual language travelled across multiple touchpoints. Animated screens looped in the lunch hall, giving visibility to every single contributor. Stickers, programmes, posters — all designed to feel intentional, cared-for. These weren't decorative extras. They worked against the anonymity of most conferences, replacing it with belonging.

Setting the tone



As attendees arrived, the screen displayed a poem I had written, entitled Brave Spaces. Rather than functioning as a formal address, it operated as a framing gesture, setting the atmosphere for the day and situating the themes of vulnerability, care, and positionality that would be further explored in the keynotes and contributions to follow.

The poem did not offer a definition of bravery but foregrounded its complexity. Bravery was positioned not as heroic individualism but as contingent and relational, dependent on structures of power, colonial histories, and uneven distributions of privilege. By voicing my own fears of complicity and complacency, the poem modelled a vulnerability that became a condition for the day's unfolding.

Brave Spaces

A poem by Layla Gharib

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Maybe that's all any bravery is
a stronger fear of not being brave
and gosh I fear not being brave

I fear sitting comfortably in my privilege
even when I dare to speak of my vibrant
heritage

I'm scared that isn't enough sometimes
When there are structures and systems
and clocks that seem to constantly chime

And if I may be bold or perhaps
even brave for a second
I can't begin this conference without
acknowledging that to be brave
is so incredibly dependent

Dependent on land, on geography, on position,
on whether or not you've been impacted by
colonialism



A grounding
moment/
A keynote
by Nina Trivedi

I was so honoured to welcome Dr. Nina Trivedi, whose keynote *Collectivist Approaches & Braver Spaces: An Introduction to the Shared Learning Space Agreement* brought the themes of the conference into focus.

Nina introduced us to the shared learning space agreement — a collaborative document designed to help groups name their needs, negotiate responsibilities, and build the foundations of a collective learning environment. What struck me was the way it remained open and adaptable: each group could reshape it, rewrite it, or rework it to fit their own dynamics. It wasn't about imposing rules, but about making care and accountability visible.

The ethos behind the agreement draws on community-based activism and non-extractive research. Its language is shaped by collective agreements already in circulation, rooting our classrooms in wider traditions of justice-making. Nina reminded us that brave spaces are never accidental — they need intentional infrastructures, agreements that hold people together and can be revisited as relationships shift. Bravery, in this framing, becomes less about individual risk and more about shared responsibility.

Nina's contribution did more than stand on its own — it set the ground for what would come later. The emphasis on shared agreements and collective responsibility fed beautifully into the final manifesto exercise, where participants co-authored what a brave space might require in our own departmental context. It was as if the keynote planted the seed, and the manifesto would go on to give it form.



Staff Contributions

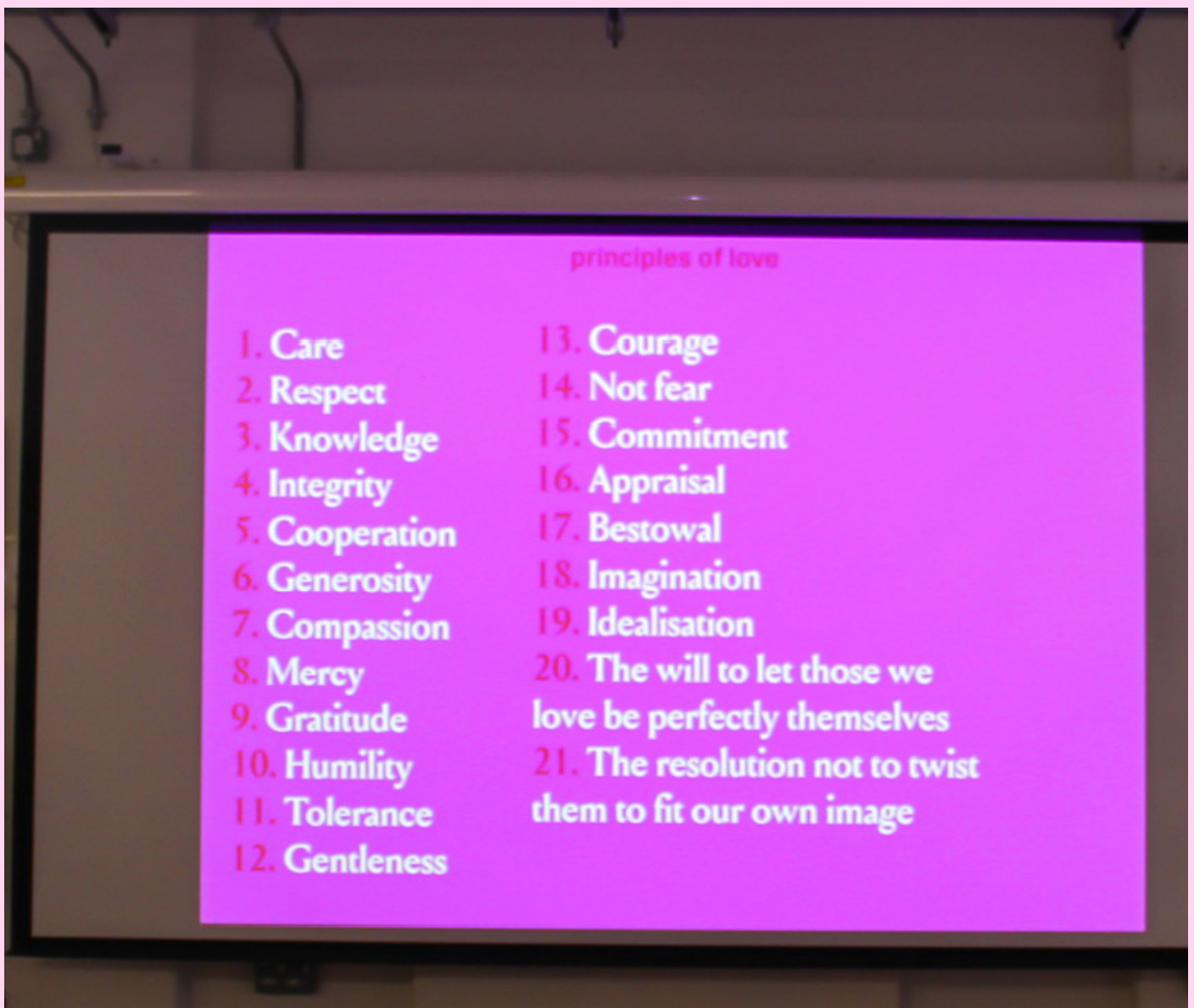
The richness of Brave Spaces came from colleagues who responded with such variety and care. The day unfolded as more than a string of papers — it became a chorus of different registers of bravery.

Joanne Lee and Helen Blejerman reframed citation as activism, showing how even referencing can be a site of resistance and inclusion. With Melanie, Joe, Eve, Catie, and Rachael, I explored the limits of equity toolkits — questioning whether they transform practice or risk flattening it into a checklist. Oliver East pushed us to consider how AI might help neurodivergent students navigate design research, exposing the shortcomings of our current support systems.

Tony Broomhead and James Corazzo invited us to look more closely at assessment conversations, urging us to see students not as abstractions but as people whose processes, products, and identities are entangled. And Yuen Fong Ling led us into the archives, bravely re-peopling collections and reclaiming voices made absent.

Finally, I brought forward my own experiment: What's Love Got to Do With It? An inventory of twenty-one principles, offered not as a checklist but as a provocation to think of pedagogy as a practice of love.

Together, these contributions made bravery feel less like a singular trait and more like a constellation of practices — citing differently, designing differently, listening differently, even loving differently.



Student Contributions



What made Brave Spaces different was how central students were to the programme. They weren't just attendees in the background; they were shaping the day, asking questions that grounded everything in lived experience.

Wren, our departmental rep at the time, ran a session on education and care that ended with pairs playing Jenga. Such a simple game — and yet it became a sharp metaphor. As towers trembled and collapsed, we were made to think about trust, risk, and the fragility of the structures we lean on in education. Bravery, here, wasn't about standing alone — it was about holding the wobble together.

Then Daisy and Amika shared the work of Tribute, the student-led collective they had built for students of colour. They spoke about carving out a space to feel at home, whether you came from a small town with little diversity or a city full of it. Tribute wasn't only about belonging; it was about visibility, connection, and lifting up voices too often left in the margins.

Together, these contributions reminded us that brave spaces cannot be designed from above. They have to be co-created with students, who carry both vulnerability and imagination into the room. Wren's playful metaphor and Tribute's community-building showed bravery in two registers — fragile and relational, grounded and structural. Both underscored that bravery is sustained through care, not spectacle.

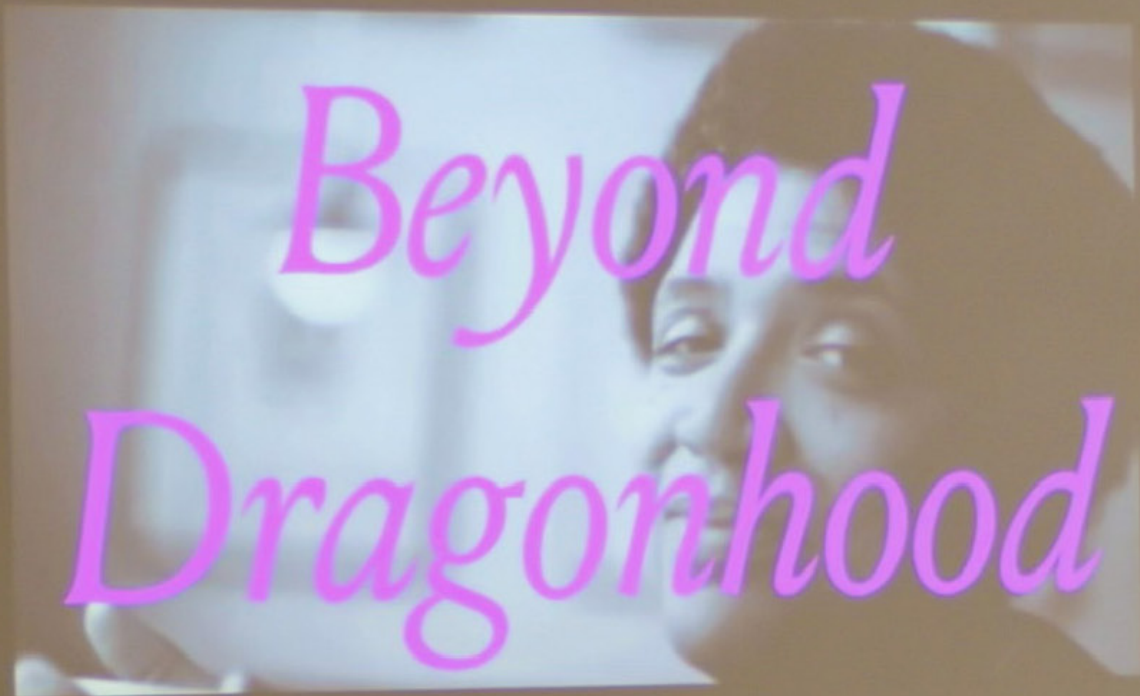
One of my own contributions grew out of an absence. A planned talk didn't go ahead, and rather than closing the gap with something polished, I decided to hold the space differently. I called it Beyond Dragonhood, borrowing from Audre Lorde's words about finding a future "someplace other than the teeth of the dragon." Not utopia, not heaven — but a fragile, collective way of going forward, rooted in survival and persistence.

I began with a recording of Lorde's voice, then asked everyone to reflect: What is the mouth of the dragon in your teaching? What are the teeth that restrict you? Around tables, people named the constraints that so often feel immovable — rigid assessment structures, Eurocentric curricula, the bureaucracy and emotional toll of academic work. But I didn't want the conversation to stop at constraint. In the second half, I handed out pink cards and asked: What makes you hopeful as an educator? Slowly, a record of hopefulness began to take shape: students' creativity, small acts of solidarity, flashes of possibility in everyday teaching.

We ended with Rebecca Solnit's reminder that hope is not a guarantee, but an orientation — "another world might be possible." For me, the session was about holding both at once: naming the dragon's teeth, but also insisting on hope, however provisional, as part of the work.

Beyond Dragon hood

A space to gather towards radical hopefulness



A single bracelet does not jingle

We closed the day slowly, with a collective activity that felt less like a finale and more like a weaving together of what had passed. I titled it *A Single Bracelet Does Not Jingle*, borrowing from a Congolese proverb. The phrase has always stayed with me — the idea that one person, no matter how committed, can't make lasting change alone. It's the sound of bracelets together that resonates.

To frame it, I paired the proverb with bell hooks' notion of beloved community: not a space where difference is erased, but where it's affirmed, claimed, and held as the ground for how we live and learn together. That felt right for this moment — a reminder that brave spaces are not made by isolated acts of bravery, but by shared commitments.

We broke into small groups. On cards, people completed three prompts:

A brave space is...

A brave space needs...

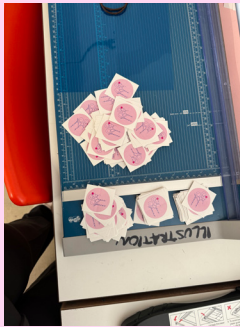
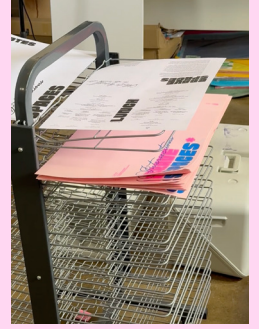
A brave space requires...

One by one, responses were added to a collective manifesto displayed at the front of the room. What emerged wasn't a polished definition, but a layering of commitments — provisional, evolving, but nonetheless binding in their public sharing.

The pace was slower, quieter than earlier parts of the day. There was no rush toward conclusion, no final keynote to wrap things up neatly. Instead, we ended with process: speaking, listening, writing together. The manifesto itself isn't reproduced here — it was never meant as research data — but the act of co-authoring it was what mattered.

It was a temporary commons, a reminder that bravery is less about lone declarations and more about distributed responsibility. That to jingle, we need each other.

Loving Brave Spaces into Existence



Curating Brave Spaces was as much about what happened behind the scenes as what unfolded on the day. The risograph sheets, the stickers, the animated screens, the sign-up lists, the countless emails and late-night edits — all of it was part of the labour of love that held the conference together. These gestures might look small or ordinary, but they were the quiet infrastructures through which the day became possible. To love Brave Spaces into existence was to believe that care, design, and organisation are never secondary to pedagogy — they are pedagogy. They are the conditions that allow bravery to take root. The images on this page make that work visible, not as an afterthought, but as part of the story of how we came together.





To conclude all of this - >

Why facilitating encounters to gather matters



Looking back across Re(writing & Re(righting) and Brave Spaces, what stays with me most is not only the content of the talks or the papers, but the fact of the gatherings themselves. To bring people together — students, staff, colleagues, external voices — is to make a claim that learning is not solitary, nor abstract, but something lived in relation. Gathering matters because it creates conditions for things that cannot be scripted in advance: the moments of vulnerability in a keynote, the wobble of a Jenga tower, the unexpected connections over lunch, the quiet stickers carried into daily life. These encounters resist the idea that education is only about curricula or outcomes. They remind us that education is also about atmospheres, about infrastructures of care, about the fragile but vital work of making space for each other.

To facilitate such encounters is labour — often invisible, often undervalued — but it is also love. It is the belief that if we gather carefully, intentionally, and with care, we can begin to imagine otherwise. Not perfectly, not permanently, but provisionally — rehearsing futures where bravery, plurality, and care are part of the everyday fabric of our institutions. That, for me, is why facilitating encounters to gather matters: because they are more than events. They are conditions, gestures, traces. They are how we love other worlds into existence.

2023



2024

