



## **Crafting a design signature book: A student exploration grounded in design awareness**

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# Crafting a Design Signature Book

A student exploration grounded in design awareness

This technical report documents the Design Signatures Book Design Research Group (DRG), a ten-week cohort that met in Spring 2026 at the University of Washington's Department of Human Centered Design and Engineering. Facilitated by Cindy Atman and co-facilitated by René Capella, the DRG served both as a learning experience for the four-participant cohort and as a structured testing ground for ideas in a forthcoming public-facing book on design signatures, the characteristic patterns and commitments that distinguish an individual designer's process. The DRG unfolded in three parts. In Weeks 1 through 3, participants oriented themselves to their own design processes through retrospective design postcards, models of design activity, design awareness questions, and an introduction to design process resilience. In Weeks 4 through 9, participants shifted from designers to readers and contributors, taking up a different lens each week the book might use to frame its content: reflection, social justice and equity, theories as frames, narrative psychology, the form and function of the book, identity development, and ambiguity. Week 10 returned the cohort to their evolving design signatures and a final synthesis. The report compiles weekly postcards and reflections, book-facing and personal writing, a three-part final synthesis, and curated book recommendations. It is organized in two registers: a week-by-week account of the DRG, and individual participant contributions presented in full. The DRG offered the book project an early read on how the design signature concept lands with a thoughtful audience, and surfaced patterns about audience, framing, and format that the book can carry forward.

## Acknowledgements

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# Section 1

## Introduction

### What Is a Design Signature and Why Does It Matter?

Every designer has a characteristic way of moving through a design process. Some spend a long time scoping the problem before touching a solution. Others generate ideas rapidly and converge through iteration. Some are highly systematic; others are opportunistic. These patterns are real: they are consistent enough to be observed, and distinctive enough to differ from person to person and project to project. A design signature is the name for this pattern.

More precisely, a design signature makes visible a trace of the design process that is usually invisible. By capturing how a designer moves through activities over time, a design signature creates an external representation, or "boundary object," that can be shared, examined, and discussed. This visibility is what makes the concept generative: once the process is visible, a designer can reflect on it, compare it to other possible processes, and make deliberate choices about how they want to design in the future. Design signatures, in this sense, are a tool for enhancing design agency.

The concept grows out of decades of empirical research on how engineers and designers engage in design, led by Cindy Atman and collaborators at the University of Washington. That research involved more than 177 participants solving over 400 design problems and documented systematic differences in how novices and experts allocate time and attention across design activities (Atman, 2019). Experts scope the problem more thoroughly, gather more information before modeling, transition more frequently between activities, and iterate more. What began as a research instrument has become the conceptual foundation for a broader set of questions about designer identity, reflection, and development.

### The Book Project This Directed Research Group Feeds Into

Cindy Atman is developing a book aimed at making the design signatures concept accessible to a broad audience: practicing designers and students, educators, and interested non-specialists. The book is not intended for an academic audience. Rather than summarizing the research literature, it aims to offer the ideas in a form that readers can apply to their own practice, understanding their own design process, reflecting on it, and developing it intentionally.

The book's working structure is still being developed. The working title has not been finalized; leading candidates combine the terms design signatures, Dear Design, design awareness, and design agency.

This technical report documents a Design Research Group (DRG) in the Human Centered Design & Engineering Department at the University of Washington that served as a testing ground for the book's ideas. The DRG asked participants to engage directly with the design

signatures concept as well as a core set of lenses on design processes. Participants reflected on their own design processes, and then examined topics that Cindy is considering for inclusion in the book. This report is intended primarily as a research resource for Cindy: a structured record of what the DRG explored, what the participants produced, and what the experience reveals about how these ideas land with a thoughtful audience.

## Why a DRG as a Testing Ground?

Cindy Atman has run numerous DRGs and workshops engaging participants with the design signatures concept and has been establishing an evidence base that the concept is useful for teaching about the design process. The rationale for this particular DRG was different: before the student participants could offer a useful perspective on how the book should be structured, framed, and written for a broad audience, they needed to experience the design signatures material firsthand. The DRG format provided that grounding, ensuring that participants' input on the book was informed by genuine personal engagement with the concepts rather than purely abstract evaluation.

Undergraduate and master's students in design and engineering fields bring enough design experience to have genuine process patterns worth examining and enough reflective capacity to articulate what they notice. At the same time, they are not so embedded in their own expertise that the concept of a design signature seems obvious. They occupy a productive middle position: enough experience to make the reflection meaningful, enough openness to make the exploration genuine.

## Overview of the DRG Format and Cohort

The DRG met weekly for ten weeks in Spring 2026 and was co-designed and co-facilitated by Cindy Atman and René Capella. The cohort comprised four student participants: two undergraduates and two master's students. Students came from design and engineering-adjacent backgrounds and brought a range of prior design experiences across physical prototyping, UX design, visual art, portfolio work, and software-adjacent projects. This range was treated as a resource: the diversity of backgrounds made it possible to examine whether the design signatures concept generalizes across design domains.

The DRG was structured in two phases. The first three weeks oriented participants to the design signatures concept through direct engagement: students tracked their own design processes using the Design Signatures app, created visual postcards representing their processes, explored many models of design, and examined the "Good Designers Do 'X'" card deck. Weeks four through nine turned outward toward topics and frameworks Cindy is considering for the book, with participants reflecting on each topic both personally and in relation to the book's potential audience and structure. The final session synthesized across the quarter. Inspired by Lupi and Posavec's book *Dear Data*, a recurring artifact throughout was the "Dear Design" postcard: a 5x7 original visualization of the participant's design process, submitted weekly with a descriptive key and personal reflection. (Lupi and Posavec, 2016)

## How to Read This Report

Section 2 provides a week-by-week outline of the DRG: what each session covered, what activities participants engaged in, and what the assignments asked. This chapter is the structural spine of the report and is summarized primarily from slides and class notes.

Section three outlines the methods used to compile this report.

Section 4 documents what happened in each session in more detail, drawing on slides, class notes, and participant work submitted to the shared technical report document. It is organized by week and captures both the facilitated content and the responses that emerged in session.

Section 5 contains the individual participant contributions from weeks four through nine. Each chapter contains the participant's weekly writing across the six book-facing topics and their final three-part synthesis assignment. These chapters are the primary data of the DRG and are presented largely in the participants' own words.

The Final Book Recommendation section synthesizes patterns across participants, reflects on what the DRG revealed about how the design signatures concept lands with this audience, and identifies implications for the book's structure and framing.

Note: All the student work in this report is original. All the class presentation materials are also original. The descriptions of the class and summaries of the student work in this report were created with the assistance of Claude Opus 4.7. In an acknowledgment of the resources used by artificial intelligence, the authors have made a donation to a carbon offset and a clean water access organization.

## Section 2

### DRG Overview

The Design Signatures Book DRG ran for ten weeks in Spring 2026, meeting weekly with a cohort of four students facilitated by Cindy Atman and Rene Capella. The DRG was organized into two phases. The first three weeks oriented participants to the design signatures concept through direct personal engagement with their own design processes. Weeks four through nine shifted outward, with each session examining a topic Cindy is considering for the book and asking participants to explore how it might function for a broad public audience. Week ten synthesized across the quarter.

### Part One: Design Signatures as a Personal Journey (Weeks 1-3)

The first phase was grounded in a core pedagogical commitment: before participants could think usefully about communicating design signatures ideas to a broader audience, they needed to experience those ideas from the inside. The recurring assignment structure across all three weeks was the "Dear Design" postcard: a 5x7 original visualization of the participant's design

process, submitted each week with a descriptive key and a personal written reflection. The constraint that the postcard must represent the design process rather than the product of design was emphasized consistently throughout.

## Week 1: Orienting to One's Own Design Process (April 1, 2026)

- Established the DRG's community and introduced its central framing
- Activities:
  - Journey map icebreaker
  - Pre-survey on participants' relationship to design
  - Retrospective design exploration activity where they created a postcard from a past design process (postcard #1)
  - Oreo tower challenge, with one team member as ethnographer tracking design activities at 30 second intervals using a bubble sheet coded with Atman's design activity categories
- Second half introduced the design expertise research underlying design signatures:
  - Playground study
  - Key findings comparing students and expert practitioners
  - Design timeline as a representational tool
- Assignment: download the Design Signatures app, track a real design process, and create a postcard representing the resulting signature (postcard #2)

## Week 2: Many Models of Design and Good Designers Do "X" (April 8, 2026)

- Opened with a review of postcard #1
- Many Models section:
  - Introduced the Dubberly Compendium (Dubberly, 2004)
  - Participants reviewed assigned sections, selected models of interest, shared them in a gallery walk
  - Organized around George Box's aphorism that all models are wrong and some are useful
- Good Designers Do "X" section:
  - Introduced a card deck of 180 statements from 35 design researchers and educators
  - Participants selected resonant cards, discussed in pairs, affinity-mapped the full deck
- Assignment: create postcard #3 using one of those frames as a lens on their own design process

## Week 3: Design Awareness, Metacognition, and the Aspirational Design Signature (April 15, 2026)

- Completed the first phase

- Engaged participants with design awareness questions developed through previous Dear Design courses
- Introduced the concept of design process resilience, connecting the design signatures framework to how designers navigate difficulty and uncertainty
- Assignment: aspirational design signature postcard (postcard #4)
  - Not a process the participant had enacted, but the process they aspire to
  - Grounded in their values and informed by the first three weeks

## Part Two: Imagining a Design Signatures Book (Weeks 4-9)

The second phase asked participants to shift from reflecting on their own processes to examining how the design signatures concept might be communicated to a broad public audience. Each week took up a topic Cindy is considering for the book. The weekly assignment structure was consistent across all six weeks: a set of book-facing prompts (what is the core insight this concept offers, and where does it belong in the book) paired with personal prompts (how does this concept change how you see your own design process, does it challenge any assumption you brought into the DRG, and what would you want a future version of yourself to remember from this week).

### Week 4: Reflection (April 22, 2026)

- Opened the second phase with reflection as the first book-facing topic
- Session components:
  - Postcard sharing
  - Freewrite on book content candidates
  - Post-survey
- Two activities:
  - Structured brainstorm of possible book audiences
  - Engagement with definitions and goals of reflection using a synthesis table of 51 activities drawn from the Consortium to Promote Reflection in Engineering Education (CPREE) collection and five academic papers
  - Small groups were assigned activities from the table, discussed, and presented
  - Concept Map making with the ideas and concepts from weeks 1-4
- Central question: how would the book convey that design signatures are helpful for design reflection?

### Week 5: Social Justice and Equity (April 29, 2026)

- Examined social justice and equity as a lens for the book
- Explored how social position, power, and structural context shape design processes and outcomes
- Considered what it would mean for a book about design signatures to engage seriously with those dimensions
- Also included an activity on design signatures and AI:

- How generative AI integration into design workflows raises new questions about designer agency, process visibility, and the meaning of a design signature when parts of the process are mediated by algorithmic tools

## Week 6: Theories as Frames (May 6, 2026)

- Asked participants to evaluate a range of theoretical frameworks as possible organizing lenses for the book:
  - Behavioral decision theory
  - Cognitive framing
- Oriented toward a practical question: which frameworks would genuinely help a non-academic reader see their own design process differently, and which would remain too abstract to be useful without extensive scaffolding?

## Week 7: Narrative Psychology and Storytelling (May 13, 2026)

- Activity: CELT Book Exploration Activity - engaging books in CELT for inspiration
- Engaged with narrative psychology and storytelling as both a theoretical lens and a practical book-making tool
- Drew on the argument that humans construct identity and make meaning through narrative rather than logical argument
- Central question: how might a book about design signatures deploy story to produce durable understanding?
- Considered how the design signatures concept is itself a narrative claim about designer identity and development over time

## Week 8: Identity Development (May 27, 2026)

- Took up identity development as the final book-facing topic
- Drew on frameworks for professional identity formation
- Explored how the design signatures concept connects to the long-term process by which designers construct and revise their understanding of who they are
- Revisited the audience analysis activity from Week 4 to examine how participants' thinking about the book's readers had developed across the quarter

## Week 9: Dealing with Ambiguity (May 20, 2026)

- Took up ambiguity as a lens on design process
- Drew on research into how expert designers navigate incomplete, contradictory, or unresolved information during design work
- Ambiguity as a key attribute of expert practice: the capacity to hold open questions long enough to understand them properly rather than resolving uncertainty prematurely
- Two distinct angles for the book:

- Ambiguity as a concept that could function as a design process "X" alongside resilience
- Ambiguity tolerance as a frame for understanding why some readers will encounter the design signatures concept as liberating while others will find it unsettling
- Central question: what might the book do to support readers whose tolerance for open-ended reflection varies widely?

## Week 10: Synthesis and Wrap-Up (June 3, 2026)

- Synthesized across the full quarter
- Activities:
  - Participants shared final insights
  - Repeat of the post-survey
  - Group design session on book ideas
- Generative rather than evaluative, asking participants to bring their accumulated DRG experience to bear on what the book should be and do

## Final Assignment

- Synthesis across the full ten weeks in three components
- Component 1: analytical piece on book content and format
  - Identify the one insight from the seminar that most changed how they think about what the book needs to do
  - Support it with evidence from Weeks 5 through 9
  - Name an honest complication or tradeoff the recommendation creates
  - Offer one concrete actionable proposal about structure, framing, a specific chapter, the design of exercises, or the book's relationship with its reader
- Component 2: Dear Design letter to a future reader of the book, written from the participant's own experience of encountering the design signatures concept
- Component 3: Dear Design letter to the participant's future self
- All participants are listed as co-authors of the technical report, which serves as the primary published record of the DRG

# Section 3

## Methods: Developing the DRG Technical Report

### Purpose

To reiterate, the student section (Section 5) of this report is original material written by each of the four students. These students' names have been anonymized to participants A, B, C, and D.

This section describes how Claude is used to produce the rest of the content for the Direct Research Group (DRG) technical report. All sections besides section 5 were written with the assistance of Claude Opus 4.7 the outputs of which were reviewed and edited by the authors.

## Resources Gathered Each Week

After each DRG session, the following materials are collected from the shared Google Drive and provided to Claude for a weekly summary in Section 4 and more detailed output including detailed summaries and connections for the book in Appendix A. Not every material is available for every week; availability is noted where relevant.

- **Class notes.** The shared Google Doc captures the student input, discussion points, facilitation arc, and decisions made during the session. Primary source for the narrative of what happened.
- **Cindy's slide deck.** The slides used in the session. Primary source for the agenda, what the session covered, and the structure Cindy brought to facilitation.
- **Zoom transcript.** The verbatim transcript from the session recording. Available from the week after the 4/23 decision to upload transcripts going forward; earlier weeks do not have transcripts in the pipeline.
- **AI-generated meeting summary.** The automatic summary produced by the meeting recording tool, including action items and key discussion themes. Useful for capturing spontaneous moments not recorded in class notes.
- **Student reflection sheets.** In-session reflection responses completed by participants, where the week's activities included a reflection sheet.
- **Student homework responses.** Written responses in the shared Technical Report Insights document, including the three book-facing and two personal reflection questions for topic weeks 4-9.
- **Postcards.** Student-generated visual postcards with descriptions and reflections on what the participant learned from creating them. Uploaded 5 times throughout the quarter.

## Process for Generating a Weekly Summary

The weekly summary workflow proceeds in four steps.

Step 1. The materials listed above are gathered into a single Claude conversation, uploaded as PDFs, images, and text documents from the shared drive.

Step 2. Claude is prompted to synthesize a weekly summary that documents what the session covered, what activities participants engaged in, what artifacts were produced, and any notable moments in discussion. The synthesis is written in prose rather than as a list, and it draws on all provided materials.

Step 3. Claude's output is reviewed and corrected according to the patterns described in the next section.

Step 4. The revised summary is placed in Appendix A of the technical report.

## Section 4

### Weekly Summaries

#### Week 1: Orienting to One's Own Design Process

In the opening session, Cindy set up the DRG's twin purposes: building Participants' awareness of their own design processes, and generating content for the design signatures book. After a journey-map icebreaker and a pre-survey, Cindy laid out the course arc. Three weeks turn inward, six weeks turn outward toward topics being considered for the book, and a synthesis week closes out the quarter. The "Dear Design" postcard, a 5x7 visualization of a design process (not a product) submitted weekly, was introduced as the course's recurring artifact.

Two activities anchored the session. A retrospective design exploration asked Participants to recall a recent design experience and begin sketching it, foregrounding the idea that design extends well beyond professional engineering contexts. This was sketched as a postcard, and became "Postcard 1" in a series of five postcards from across the DRG. The Oreo tower challenge then put small teams under a ten-minute, six-cookie constraint, with one team member acting as ethnographer and tracking activity in 30-second intervals on a bubble sheet coded with Atman's design activity categories. Teams compared sheets and debriefed how processes differed across teams and whether process correlated with outcome.

The second half introduced the design expertise research underpinning design signatures: 177 designers across 401 problems, with the playground study showing that experts spend more time scoping problems and exhibit a distinctive cascade pattern across activities. Design timelines were introduced as the representational tool, and design signatures as the conceptual extension: a designer's characteristic shape of process. The Week 2 assignment, Postcard 2: Design Signature/Design Expertise Postcard, asked Participants to use the Design Signatures app to track a real design activity and produce a postcard from the resulting timeline. Across the four retrospective postcards submitted in class, two cross-cutting themes emerged: personal design processes are non-linear, and activity phases resist clean categorization.

#### Week 2: Many Models of Design and Good Designers Do "X"

The second session opened with a review of the Postcard 2: Design Signature/Design Expertise postcards. Each Participant presented in turn: Participant D's three-stage cherry blossom drawing, Participant C's pet grooming tool with iterations between modeling and implementation,

Participant B's Venn diagram of overlapping activities, and Participant A's Formula 1 track. Cindy framed the through-line: an app-based timeline is one capture method among many, and the point of any of them is making the invisible design process visible so a designer can learn from it. Pair discussions surfaced shared observations that Participants moved quickly between phases and found it hard to know which phase they were in, and that naming a phase forces useful slowdown.

The Many Models block established a model as a representation that necessarily sacrifices detail, and a design process model as a framework that captures what happens when someone designs while leaving much out by definition. Students worked individually with sections of the Dubberly Compendium, selected three or four models, and shared them in a gallery walk. (Dubberly, 2004) The debrief surfaced common structural elements across the variation, including iteration, questioning, and a tendency to scope the problem before moving toward solutions. The framing aphorism throughout was George Box's: all models are wrong, and some are useful. Cindy was explicit about why fluency across frameworks matters: it supports a nimble mindset and gives designers more tools when stuck, including in organizations that mandate a single shared model.

The second half introduced Good Designers Do "X" (GDDX), a project in which 35 design researchers and educators were asked off the top of their heads what they tell people good designers do. The 180 resulting statements were compiled into a card deck and published as an HCDE Technical Report (Atman et al., 2025). Participants reviewed a quarter of the deck each, picked two cards that resonated, and then affinity-mapped the full deck in pairs. Discussion surfaced two clusters: the importance of scoping the problem before the solution and of knowing when and how to apply specific design tools, and the recognition that design is fundamentally about people, requires comfort with ambiguity, and pushes toward exploring multiple alternatives rather than committing prematurely.

Two assignments closed the session. Participants were asked to find a meaningful personal quote to anchor their Week 3 aspirational postcard, and to create Postcard 3: Many Models of Design/GDDX working from either Many Models, GDDX, or a combination. The four postcards consistently used a chosen quote or model as a frame for reflecting on the Participant's own design intentions.

### Week 3: Design Process \_\_\_\_\_ and Design Awareness Questions

The third session closed the inward-facing first phase of the DRG. After a check-in and pair review of the Week 2 postcards, the session ran two main activities bracketed by a break, and rolled out the final postcard assignment of the phase.

The first activity, Design Process \_\_\_\_\_, framed the question of what process attributes beyond resilience could be similarly generative for studying design. Cindy noted that her parallel DRG uses resilience and asked what else might do that work. Participants chose three from a curated list of nine candidate attributes (Curiosity, Confidence, Patience, Courage, Playfulness, Integrity, Humility, Adaptability, Presence), wrote a sentence on each, then added their own

candidates on sticky notes. The collective additions ranged across collaboration, determination, empathy, optimism, experimentation, iteration, trust, openness, ambiguity, intention, awareness, mindfulness, and others, suggesting that the territory of generative process attributes is considerably wider than any one curated list.

The second activity was built around the concept of Design Awareness Questions. Cindy reintroduced design signatures as the invisible tracings of process that representation makes visible, then connected them to metacognition (planning, monitoring, evaluating) and from there to design awareness as the precondition for any of those regulatory moves: a designer cannot plan, monitor, or evaluate a process they are not aware of. Schön's reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action from the book "The Reflective Practitioner" (1983) anchored the broader frame. Design awareness questions were positioned as the practical handle on this whole chain: the questions a designer can ask of their own process to make it visible and available for change. Participants generated questions individually on sticky notes, then affinity-grouped them. Six emergent categories surfaced: Rushing, Unnoticed Areas, Audience and Users, Feelings About Process, Design Patterns, and Design Intention. The session also displayed example postcards and a fourteen-category taxonomy of awareness developed across approximately 100 questions from prior Dear Design seminars; the four-student categories mapped well onto this larger taxonomy.

The session closed by introducing Postcard 4: Aspirational Design Signature. Participants were asked to anchor the postcard in their design values and pair it with a meaningful quote.

## Week 4: Opportunities for Reflection

The fourth session opened the second phase of the DRG — the move from inward-facing work toward book-facing content. The framing question oriented every activity: How would the book convey that design signatures are helpful for design reflection?

The session ran five activity blocks.

The postcard share-out asked students to compare their Week 3 aspirational postcards to their initial Week 1 retrospective postcards. The post-survey, moved up from later in the agenda, asked students to retake the Week 1 pre-survey and reflect on what had changed. The concept map activity asked each student to organize the seminar's accumulated content. After a break, Cindy framed reflection through Schön (reflection-in-action, reflection-on-action) and introduced a synthesis table of 51 reflection activities organized into nine categories; pairs worked through assigned activity groups and shared in a gallery walk.

The four submitted aspirational postcards converged on a shared move: each used a continuous, non-linear figure (path, tree, Möbius strip, wave) to reject design as a sequence with a start and finish, and located the generative force of process in internal intention rather than procedure. Two Participants independently named, in their end-of-session reflection sheets, the same observation that designing and living are continuous practices rather than separable activities. Both observations landed in the "what struck you" column, suggesting that the Week 3

material registers, for Participants, as continuous with larger questions about self-awareness rather than as narrowly methodological.

Three takeaways from the session and take-home reflections:

**The retrospective-to-aspirational arc is consistent.** All four students described the same shift between Weeks 1 and 3 — concrete, project-specific, and step-by-step toward abstract, metaphorical, and pattern-oriented — suggesting the four-postcard sequence up to this point does specific representational work.

**The four concept maps produced four organizing logics on the same content.** Participant D arranged the material as a left-to-right flow labeled "Practices"; Participant A placed the book itself at the center, annotated "reproducible activities & prompts in the book"; Participant B centered hers on "Design Process"; Participant C centered hers on "As a Designer..." — the only map anchored in designer identity rather than process. The book may need to support more than one path through the same material.

**The take-home reflections converged on two findings.** All four students independently articulated reflection as structurally similar to the design process — iterative, non-linear, distributed across the work rather than collected at its end. And all four argued for reflection's placement in the book as a recurring thread rather than a single chapter, with three explicitly recommending a workbook-or-prompt-embedded format.

## Week 5: Reflection Debrief & Social Justice and Equity Introduction

The fifth session was the first session run on the new pattern that will continue through Week 9: the previous week's topic gets debriefed first, and the next week's topic gets introduced second. The reflection debrief came next. Each student shared a one-line summary of the core insight from their Week 4 take-home reflection, with each naming a different operation reflection performs (look back, decide what to do next, spot patterns, set intentions). The audience brainstorm followed, with the resulting ideas: design students, junior and early-career designers, design instructors, career coaches, AI researchers, and general readers seeking personal development. The discussion of bookstore placement raised the possibility that the design content could equally sit in a personal-development section, where it could reach readers who are not seeking out design literature. The session then introduced Social Justice and Equity through Costanza-Chock's *Design Justice* (2020), with students reading the Introduction and Chapter 1 in class and sharing takeaways twice. The session closed with the Week 6 assignment (the seven-question prompt applied to Social Justice and Equity) and the standard reflection sheet.

Three takeaways from the session and the take-home reflections:

**Design is not neutral landed across all four students** — but as an absorption of Costanza-Chock's central thesis, not as a novel finding the cohort produced. The more

interesting evidence is in how each student translated the claim into their own working vocabulary.

**The personal reflections show wider variance than Week 4 did.** Participant A reported the largest identity-level shift ("my process has politics too"); Participant D reported a professionally specific shift (her past defaults at work); Participant C reported a procedural shift (which users come to mind first); Participant B reported the smallest shift, naming her privilege explicitly and noting the topic did not push back on assumptions she brought in. Participant D's take-home names this directly: the content does different work for readers in marginalized groups (it gives language to something they have already felt) than for readers in privileged groups (it reveals what they have never had to notice). That two-audience framing is the cleanest articulation in the four reflections of why the book's social-justice content needs to do different work for different readers.

**All four students argued for the same placement of the concept in the book** — integrated throughout rather than confined to a single chapter, with explicit links to the design awareness questions and exercises from earlier weeks. Participant A proposed a question to add to every existing exercise: "How does this pattern relate to power, and who is most affected by it?" The placement convergence reinforces the workbook-or-prompt-embedded format the four students had already proposed in Week 4; what Week 5 adds is the specific class of question — about power, about who is centered, about who is left out — that the book would ask.

## Week 6: Social Justice and Equity Debrief & Theories Introduction

Week 6 was the second session organized around the debrief-and-introduction pattern. Participant C led the Social Justice and Equity debrief, the cohort brainstormed intersections between the DRG's concepts and AI and produced a substantive thread on "cognitive surrender" , and Cindy and René introduced theories as scaffolding for the book through Lakoff's introduction to *Don't Think of an Elephant!* (2004) and a brief orientation to Kahneman's *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (2011).

Three findings from the session and homework responses are worth carrying into the book:

**The cohort wants theory as a thread, not a chapter.** All four students argued in their take-home writing that the theories content belongs woven through the book rather than as a single dedicated chapter, and three explicitly recommended the format be questions or activities embedded in the postcards and exercises. Participant A put it most directly: framing, fast and slow thinking, and narrative are "the invisible logic under every exercise."

**Theories functioned as diagnostic tools, not abstract content.** All four students reframed theory from academic material to a way of naming what their own design process is already doing. Participant D recognized her own System 1 reactions in design reviews and described jumping to solutions through the elephant-and-rider metaphor; Participant C reread her reference-checking habit as a slow-system move rather than a confidence problem; Participant

B identified the negative stories she tells herself about her design skills; Participant A noticed the System 1 jump to "this is obviously the right pattern" and started asking what frame was running underneath. This suggests the book's theory content needs to be operationalized for the reader rather than introduced.

**Audiences split sharply by career stage and field.** Each student named a different reader: Participant D pointed to non-designers crossing into design (engineers, product managers, researchers); Participants A and C pointed to early-career designers and students unsure whether their process is "right"; Participant B pointed to mid-career designers dissatisfied with current practice. This spread is useful early evidence that the same theory does different work for different readers, and the book may need to flag which theory serves which reader.

The four in-class reflection sheets confirm the integration. Participant D sketched an elephant for System 1 and a figure with antennae touching AI for System 2; Participant B diagrammed System 1 as a cloud and System 2 as a box; Participant C mapped "Design & AI" into questions about whose values AI reflects; Participant A compressed the day to "AI x Design." Participant D additionally bridged Lakoff's Father versus Mother model to the "primary caregivers" concept from her psychology coursework.

## Week 7: Theories Debrief & Narrative Psychology / Storytelling Introduction

The agenda for Week 7 included a compressed Kahneman Chapter 1 share-out from "Thinking Fast and Slow" (2011), the Theories debrief led by Participant B, a CELT books activity for format inspiration, a Hidden Brain debrief on narrative psychology, an in-class read of Bruner's "Life as Narrative" (1987), and the Week 8 assignment.

The CELT books activity was very generative. The cohort visited the CELT collection which included a variety of book topics and formats including books with fold outs, books with spaces for reflection, unconventional books, and games and brainstormed at least three book-format ideas each. They then brainstormed at least three book-format ideas each. Participant B proposed a double-notepad structure (one for drawing and writing reflections, one for reading), envelope-letter inserts inspired by a dragon book the cohort encountered, flip-open sections with example postcards, and open writing space rather than lined pages with comic-like imagery. Participant A proposed a desktop-sized notebook with iPhone or iPad-sized sketch frames for design timelines, design signature postcards with stamp-style miniatures of different signatures on the top right, and postcards distributed across all chapters with reflective questions that accumulate into an end-of-book reflection set. Participant C proposed an interactive book with sketching and writing space, small activities throughout, and postcards or fold-out sections. Participant D proposed a coloring book of grid shapes for recording design signatures and time-on-task, a cut-out last page that reveals highlighted central ideas while the full text below explains, and a travel-book format with an illustrative map of the design journey where each stop is described like a tourist attraction.

Three findings worth carrying into the book:

**Placement recommendations diverged for the first time.** Weeks 4, 5, and 6 produced near-universal "thread throughout, embedded in postcards" claims. Narrative psychology produced four distinct placements: Participant A as a cluster across postcards; Participant B as a chapter near the end for portfolio storytelling; Participant C as small reflection prompts after each activity; Participant D as a bridge between design awareness and storytelling sections. Narrative psychology is an intervention, not a lens, and the book may need to do multiple things with the same conceptual material.

**All four students named storytelling as a design move, not just an interpretive one.** Participant B framed it as obligation ("not just something I can do but something I should do"); Participant D as agency ("I can better shape my own life narrative"); Participant C, previously the most reserved, produced her firmest line yet ("A hard process does not mean I failed or that I am not capable"); Participant A claimed "more authorship over my design story than I was claiming before." This mimesis-as-design-agency framing makes narrative psychology categorically different from earlier topics: reflection lets a designer notice, social justice lets her ask who she centered, theories let her name a frame. Narrative lets her change what her design process means by retelling it.

**Participants C and A pushed back on the redemption-arc default.** Participant C: "I do not think every difficult moment has to become a positive story. Sometimes the more useful thing is just noticing what kind of story I keep telling myself, and whether that story is helping me or limiting me." Participant A added that she does not want to "force a fake positive narrative on hard experiences." The book's narrative content must offer restorying without prescribing the redemption arc.

The CELT books activity also produced the cohort's first concrete format proposals: stamp-style postcards across chapters, double notepads with envelope-letter inserts, coloring-book grids for design signatures, a travel-book map of the design journey. The three available reflection sheets show the integration: Participant A drew a book layout; Participant B drew a wavy line from "start" to "end" labeled "redemptive"; Participant D drew two stick figures, one "I'm poor" and one "I'm rich," rendering mimesis visually.

## Week 8: Storytelling Debrief & Identity Development Introduction

The agenda ran: a debrief of the Narrative Psychology and Storytelling homework responses, a walk-through of the technical report structure with feedback solicited from the cohort, a peer review activity using a "roses and thorns" structure across rotating pairs, an in-class read of Adams et al.'s "Being a professional: Three lenses into design thinking, acting, and being" as the introduction to Identity Development, a discussion of the Week 9 assignment, and the standard reflection sheet.

Three findings worth carrying into the book:

The cohort converged on a two-layer structure of design stories. Participant A framed the design narrative as carrying both a logical process and timeline layer and a separate narrative layer that includes thoughts, feelings, turning points, and aha moments. Participant D extended this with mimesis as the idea that the stories we tell ourselves unconsciously drive our future direction. Participant B argued storytelling allows designers to see their process in a more positive trajectory, particularly for portfolio presentation. Participant C grounded the same insight in daily noticing of what story one keeps telling. The cohort effectively defined storytelling as a tool that operates on both the surface and the depth of design experience, regardless of where in the book it should live.

Participant C produced the cohort's first explicit counter-voice to a framework. Her addition that "I don't think every difficult moment has to become a positive story, because sometimes the more useful thing is just noticing what kind of story I keep telling myself, and whether that story is helping me or not" pushes back on the redemption-arc reading that Participant B endorsed. This is the first time in the DRG that a participant has resisted the framing of assigned material rather than extending it. The book's storytelling content should anticipate this resistance and validate it. Making meaning out of difficulty is not the same as forcing a positive frame onto it.

The Adams et al. discussion about the paper, "Being a professional: Three lenses into design thinking, acting, and being" produced strong vocabulary convergence on identity terms (Adams et al., 2011). All four participants used "way of being," "knowing, acting, and being," "embodied practice," and "multiple trajectories" in their takeaways. Three of four explicitly connected these to design signatures. This level of vocabulary alignment was rare for the DRG in earlier weeks and suggests the Week 9 identity homework will produce a usable foundation for the book's identity chapter or thread.

## Week 9: Ambiguity

Week 9 debriefed the Week 8 identity development homework, shared final postcards from the closing of the postcard arc, presented the From Instrumental to Existential ambiguity research and brainstormed how the concept could fit into the book, reviewed the full quarter through a ten-things-noticed activity, and previewed the Week 10 final assignment.

**The cohort's ambiguity vocabulary is markedly more developed than the research cohort's.** When asked what ambiguity means for design, participants offered framings as a signal that a pivot may be needed, openness to revise after user research, a generative state where more possibilities become available, and the inherent subjectivity of design. The research cohort surveyed for the From Instrumental to Existential study had largely described ambiguity as uncertainty they did not like. The gap matters for the book's framing of who the format works for.

**All four participants independently arrived at non-linearity with structure in their final postcards.** Participant A's continuous wave, Participant C's hiking trail with named checkpoints,

Participant B's river of layered currents, and Participant D's embedding of her own hand inside her process all rendered the same underlying claim. The set works as a coherent visual argument for the book's central thesis.

**Identity development is now framed by the cohort as a way of being rather than skill accumulation, but placement in the book remains unresolved.** Participant D described becoming a professional as judgment and decision-making rather than tool fluency. Participant C named the discomfort of owning the identity side of design rather than hiding behind technical work. Participants A and B were ambivalent about whether identity belongs at the beginning, end, or running throughout.

**Four structural proposals for ambiguity in the book emerged from the brainstorm.** A small standalone chapter or activity (Participant C), a quiet lens running underneath with embedded prompts (Participant A), implicit absorption through activities (Participant B), and explicit pairing with identity development (Participant D). The four-way disagreement is itself diagnostic of how the concept resists chapterization.

**Agentic language across the cohort signals pedagogical uptake.** Cindy named the shift in how participants describe themselves: as reflectors, embracers, and active authors of their own process rather than passive recipients of method. This gives the book a concrete observable target for what reflection sounds like when it has done its work.

## Week 10: Ambiguity

Week 10 was the final session of the Spring 2026 DRG, structured around four activities: reviewing the technical report for completeness, sharing book recommendations from the final homework, completing a survey of accumulated book insights, and closing with personal reflections through the Dear Design letters to self.

**Book recommendation presentations.** Each Participant gave a brief summary of their Book Contribution Memo. Participant A proposed a hybrid narrative-workbook structure with identity and ambiguity woven through every activity rather than isolated in standalone chapters. Participant C recommended a guided workbook format with one idea per section followed by a small applied activity, including open space for sketches, timelines, and postcards. Participant D argued the book should help readers become better versions of themselves rather than teaching a more efficient process, and proposed building in prompts for readers to share reflections with others. Participant B focused on the overlap between design and personal identity, recommending exercises in narrative reframing where readers rewrite design events as growth stories.

**A 15-item survey of cumulative book insights** was then completed by the cohort. Strong consensus emerged around three recommendations: showing non-linear process as normal rather than a sign of failure, including open space for multiple response formats, and featuring real design signatures from multiple designers. The design justice per-exercise prompt received

the most divided response, suggesting Participants valued justice content in the book but disagreed on how granularly it should be embedded.

**The session closed with the Dear Design letters to self.** Each Participant read their letter aloud. Participant A named reflection as something more than a pit stop and committed to keeping three questions alive: Who am I being in this project? Whose perspectives am I carrying? What kind of ambiguity is this? Participant C reminded their future self that uncertainty is a signal to pause, not accelerate. Participant D described the shift from believing good design meant mastering the right skills to understanding the work was always about building a person. Participant B named the design process as still feeling abstract, framing the seminar as a first step toward slowing down.

**Cindy closed** with the David Foster Wallace fish-and-water parable, a personal story about a Luck Buddha found in Thailand whose return she attributed to her willingness to let it go, and a passage from Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet* on loving the questions themselves (Rilke, 1929; Wallace, 2009). Her stated hope for the book is that it invites readers to do the same.

## Section 5

### Student Contributions and Insights

This section brings together the written and visual work of the four DRG participants across the full quarter. It is organized by participant and follows a consistent arc: postcards from Weeks 1 through 3, a reflection on what those early weeks revealed about each person's design process, a summary of their engagement with the book-facing topics from Weeks 4 through 9, a final postcard revisiting their aspirational design signature, a Dear Design letter written to themselves, final recommendations for the book, and a Dear Design letter addressed to future readers.

The postcards are the thread that runs through everything. Beginning in Week 1 with a retrospective look at a recent design process, participants drew and redrew their signatures across prompts that moved from description to aspiration, and then from aspiration back through the lens of what Weeks 4 through 9 had added. The later weeks introduced frames, narrative psychology, identity development, design justice, and ambiguity, topics that pushed participants to examine not just what they do when they design but who they are becoming through that practice. The final postcard in Week 9 asked participants to return to their aspirational signature with all of that in view.

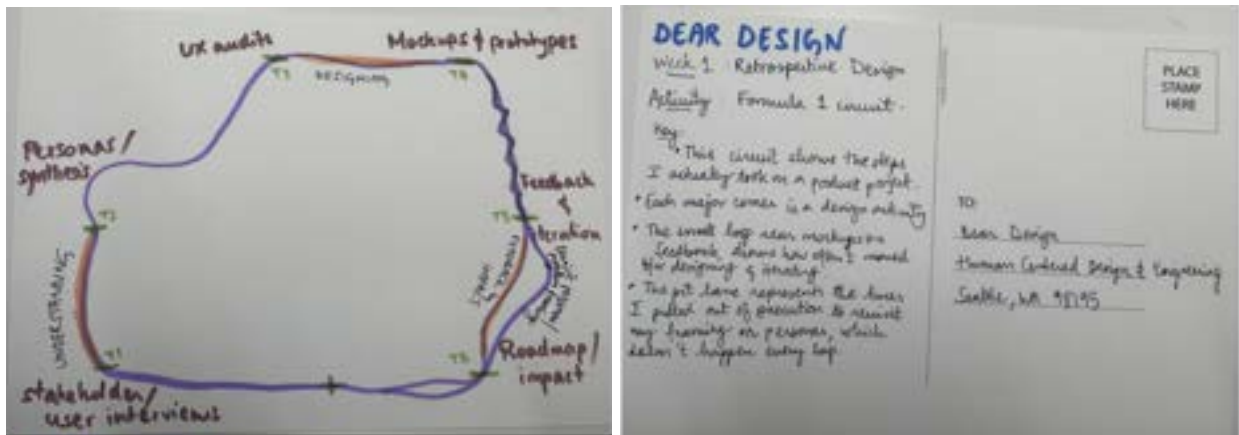
Taken together, the contributions in this section reveal four distinct trajectories through the same material. What they share is a common movement: from describing a design process to questioning it, and from questioning it to beginning to own it differently.

# Dear Design Synthesis by Participant

## Participant A

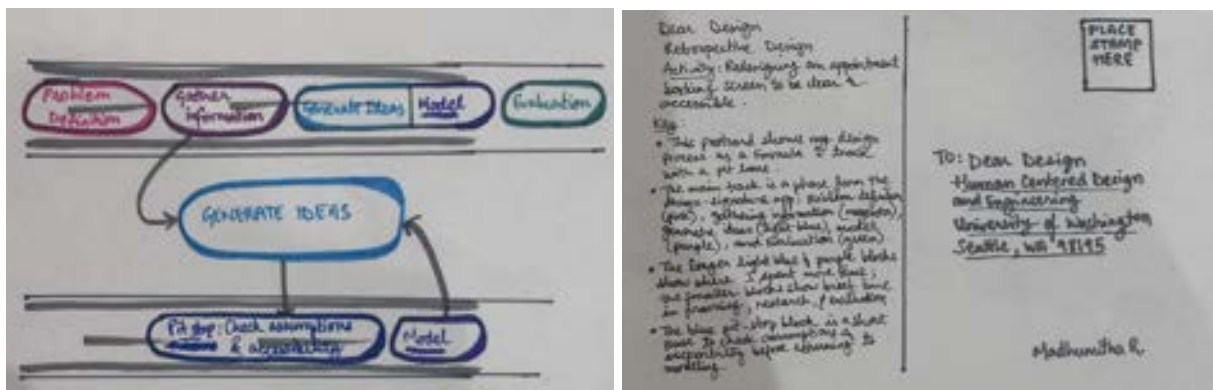
Dear Design: Postcards 1 - 4

### Postcard 1 - Retrospective Design Process



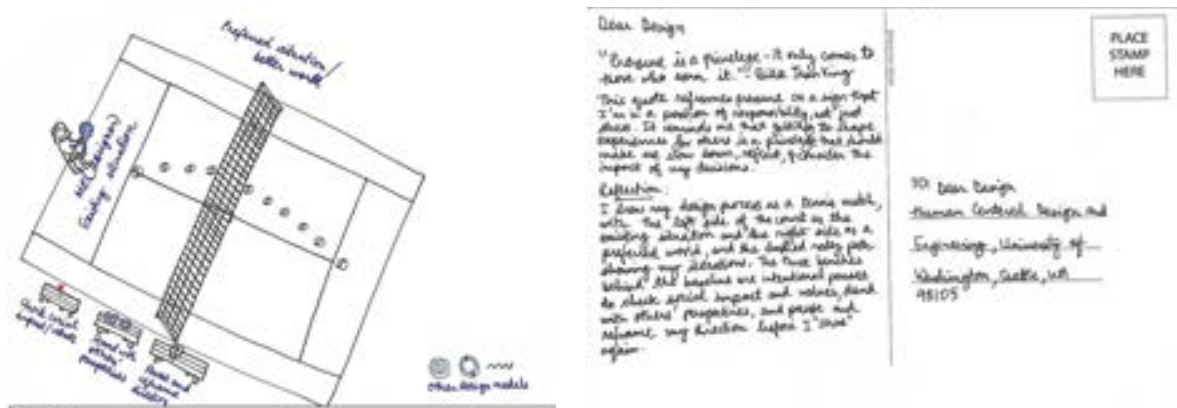
This postcard represents my process on a recent product internship as an F1 circuit. I moved from interviews and synthesis into UX audits and then spent a lot of time looping between mockups and feedback, with only occasional pit stops to rethink my framing. It captures how my current design signature is fast and delivery-oriented, but not always intentional about mid-project reflection.

### Postcard 2 - Design Signature



This postcard describes my process for redesigning an appointment-booking screen to be more accessible and clear. The colored blocks on the main track show each phase of my session, with their lengths roughly matching how much time I spent in that phase. I spent the most time in generating ideas and modeling, and much less time in problem definition, gathering information, and evaluation. The pit-lane block shows a brief stop to check my assumptions and accessibility choices before returning to modeling rather than moving straight into implementation.

Postcard 3 - Good Designers Do "X"



This postcard was inspired by the "Good Designers Do X" cards and Billie Jean King's quote "Pressure is a privilege - it only comes to those who earn it." I drew my design process as a tennis match, with the left side of the court as the existing situation and the right side as a preferred world I'm aiming for. The dashed rally path shows my iterations, while three benches behind the baseline mark intentional pauses to check social impact and values, stand with others' perspectives, and pause and reframe my direction before I "serve" again.

Postcard 4 - Aspirational Design Signature



I drew my aspirational design process as a single wave that moves across phases of a project: frame, explore, make, test, and reflect. Along the wave, three small icons repeat: a heart/scale to check values and social impact, two heads to stand with others' perspectives, and a question mark/eye to pause and reframe my direction. This postcard is meant to be a model I can look back at during real projects to remind myself that these questions should show up all the way through my process, not just at the end.

What I learned about myself as a designer creating these postcards

Creating these postcards helped me see how strongly I gravitate toward fast, delivery oriented work, even when I think of myself as a reflective designer. In the F1 circuit loop and the track, I kept drawing long stretches of making and modeling, with only brief pit stops to check my framing, assumptions, or accessibility choices. That made something that I don't admit to myself very clear: once I have momentum, I tend to stay on the main track and treat reflection as a short interruption instead of something that runs alongside the work. I also noticed how frequently I frame design as performance under pressure, whether that's shipping an internship project or winning a tennis tournament against the existing situation.

At the same time, the tennis match and wave postcards showed me an emerging, a more aspirational version of my design self. When I drew benches and icons for values, standing with others, and reframing, I realized I actually want those pauses to be built in routines, not just occasional check-ins at the very end. The wave postcard, especially, made me see that I'm consistently trying to move from a stop and go posture toward a process where questions about social impact, perspectives, and reframing are woven through every phase. Overall, the early weeks of Dear Design taught me that my signature right now is fast, structured, and outcomes driven. It also shows I'm actively reaching for a version of my practice where I slow down, broaden my frame, and stay in conversation with my values all the way through.

## Second part of the seminar: Weeks 4-9

For weeks 4-9, I learned that a lot of my design work lives inside invisible structures: frames, fast intuitions, and narratives; long before it shows up as steps on a process diagram. Reading Lakoff, Kahneman, the narrative pieces, and Adams et al. made me see that I'm not just executing methods; I'm constantly framing problems, letting my System 1 jump to obvious answers, and then telling a particular story about what happened. When I look back at my postcards through that lens, I can see how strongly I've been identifying with a fast, structured, outcomes-driven designer identity, even when I thought of myself as reflective.

I also noticed that I'm slowly shifting from treating reflection and values as pit stops to seeing them as part of the main track. The tennis court and wave postcards already hinted at benches and icons where I pause to check social impact, stand with others' perspectives, and reframe, and the final wave based signature makes those pauses continuous rather than occasional. The identity and professional way of being language helped me name that shift. I still bring speed, structure, and performance from my Formula 1 circuit days, but I'm actively reaching for a version of myself who is willing to slow down, live with ambiguity, and keep my values and relationships in the room all the way through a project.

## Postcard 5 - Revisiting Aspirational Design Signature in Week 9



This postcard represents my current and aspirational design signature after moving through Weeks 4-9 of Dear Design. It combines the speed and structure of my earlier F1 circuit and track motifs with the continuity and reflection of the wave and benches. The main line still moves forward across phases like frame, explore, make, test, and reflect, but it now has built-in “benches” and symbols, hearts/scales for values and impact, two heads for others’ perspectives, and a question-mark/eye for reframing; that repeat all along the path rather than just at pit stops. It shows a practice that is still capable of moving quickly, but that is increasingly defined by how often I check my values, stand with others, and question my framing while the work is happening, not just at the end.

### Wrap-up

Up to week 9, Dear Design has basically turned my design signature into a mirror. The early weeks surfaced my default pattern; move quickly, stay on the main track, and treat reflection as a short interruption, while the later weeks gave me language and tools to question that pattern. This entailed frames, System 1 / System 2, narrative identities, and professional ways of being. Across the postcards and readings, I can see my trajectory moving from “I do design” toward “this is who I’m being when I go about designing something” and from “there’s one right process” toward “there are multiple possible ways and identities I can grow into”.

My signature is still fast, structured, and outcomes oriented, but I’m learning to weave in slower and more relational ways of working, and to see that shift as part of becoming a professional rather than a flaw. I want the book, and my final signature postcard, to invite future readers into that same kind of noticing; which is, to treat their own metaphors and stories as drafts of who they’re becoming as designers, and to feel permission to keep redrawing those drafts over time.

### Dear Design Letter to Myself

## Dear Future Me,

I'm writing from the end of the Dear Design DRG, where my process currently looks like a blue wave with little hearts, heads, and question marks woven all the way through. Currently, that drawing feels part real, part aspirational.

If you're reading this months or years later, I hope you haven't forgotten how hard it was to see your process clearly the first time. It was uncomfortable to notice how fast you like to move, how much you treat reflection as a pit stop, and how frequently you frame design as performance under pressure. I don't want you to see this moment as some tidy "before and after" story. It wasn't that. It was more like catching yourself in the act.

What I hope you remember from this DRG is that your design signature is not something that is fixed. You're allowed to redraw it as your frames, values, and life change. When ambiguity shows up, and it surely will, try not to instantly crush it into a solid problem statement. Sometimes it's a signal to broaden your lens, revisit your philosophy, your commitments, or get more perspectives in.

Please keep asking yourself the questions we practiced here: Who am I being in this project? Whose perspectives am I carrying with me? What kind of ambiguity is this, and what might it be trying to teach me?

If you can keep those questions alive, I trust that you will keep evolving in good ways.

Love,  
Participant A

## Final Book Suggestions

The biggest thing this DRG changed for me is how I think about the book's job: it's not just explaining "good design", it's helping readers see and redraw their own design signatures. That includes the invisible stuff we kept uncovering over Weeks 4-9 frames, fast/slow thinking, narrative identity, and various relationships to ambiguity; not just methods or steps.

I now think the book's core work is to make those invisible structures visible, and then give readers tools to experiment with new ways of being designers, not just new ways of doing design.

Across Weeks 4-9, a couple things stood out as strong support for this aspect:

First, the postcard and signatures clearly showed how much people's "default signatures" are shaped by identity, speed, and comfort with ambiguity. In my own case, the Formula 1 track and early postcards revealed a fast, structured, outcome driven pattern, even when I thought of myself as reflective. The later wave based signature and Week 9 ambiguity conversations

showed that the real shift wasn't just some new method; but it was a different stance toward reflection, values, and not knowing.

Then, the identity and professional way of being reading(s) gave language to what the postcards were already showcasing. They helped me see myself not just as someone who uses design skills, but as someone who is practicing into a particular designer self. That suggests the book should consistently nudge readers to ask "who am I being here?" alongside "what did I do?".

Lastly, the ambiguity research from Week 9 made it clear that designers experience different kinds of ambiguity (instrumental vs. existential), and that people can dislike ambiguity and still function well under it. Hearing my peers talk about ambiguity as openness to ideas, as moments that force iteration, or as an identity question "What does this problem mean for who I'm becoming?" showed how powerful it is to name what kind of uncertainty they are in. The book may act as a lens on invisible experience, not just a catalog of tools.

The honest complication is that a book that really takes identity and ambiguity seriously risks feeling abstract, heavy, or overwhelming; especially for readers who just wanted a clean process model. If we lean too far into reflection, narrative, and ambiguity, we could lose people who are early in their journey or who feel under a lot of pressure in terms of performance.

There's also a pacing tradeoff here: if every chapter pauses for deep identity questions, readers may get a feeling that they are never doing design. On the other hand, if the book stays too light and tool focused, it will fail at the thing this DRG showed is most needed: helping designers see their signatures, their frames, and their professional way of being. Navigating that tension; between accessibility and depth, between comfort and ambiguity, is the main design challenge I see.

Some concrete recommendations that I think would showcase what we learned without losing readers:

**1. Make the book a hybrid of narrative + workbook**

- Use short narrative sections (stories of designers, including students) to introduce each major lens: framing, slow/fast thinking, narrative identity, ambiguity, justice; and then pair those with mini, doable exercises (postcards, timelines, reflection prompts).
- Keep exercises simple and visual, like our postcards, so readers can literally see their design signature evolving over the book instead of only reading about theory.

**2. Thread identity and ambiguity through, instead of isolating them**

- Rather than a giant identity chapter or ambiguity chapter, weave those into every activity. For instance under each exercise, include mini prompts such as:
  - "Who were you being here?"
  - "What kind of ambiguity is this: instrumental or existential?"
  - "Are you trying to reduce this ambiguity or learn from it?"

- This keeps the identity and ambiguity aspect present but not overwhelming.
- 3. Build a recurring signature check-in feature**
- Every few chapters, invite readers to redraw or maybe annotate their current design signature; like updated postcards, and answer 2-3 short questions about what has changed in their process, identity, and relationship to ambiguity.
  - Including some real design signatures as examples can showcase and make messiness look normal, as well as show multiple trajectories instead of one path.
- 4. Be explicit about the book's stance in the introduction section**
- Early on, explain that this book is not promising a 100% perfect process; it's only inviting readers into an ongoing process/conversation with their own practice.
  - A line that sets a clear explanation of what the book is about and what the readers can expect is always helpful.

If the book can hold such a balance which is both practical and reflective, honest about ambiguity, I think it will do what this DRG did for me.

## Dear Design Letter to Future Reader

### Dear Future Reader,

I'm picturing you as someone who already does design in some way; maybe in school, on the job, but still feels like everyone who has a cleaner process or identity than you do. You might have a portfolio filled with case studies, but they don't really capture what it feels like to be inside your projects.

This book isn't just going to hand you a magic process diagram that fixes that. What it can do is help you see the signature you already have: the way you move through projects, the frames you default to, how fast you run through, how you handle ambiguity, and the stories you tell about what happened. A lot of us discovered that our signatures were much more fast, linear, and outcome obsessed than we wanted to admit.

The activities in here; the postcards, timelines, little Dear Design letters, are invitations to redraw that signature, a little at a time. They might make you a bit uncomfortable, because seeing your own process clearly always does. But they also create space to ask new questions: Who am I being when I design? Where do my values actually show up? What kind of ambiguity am I in right now?

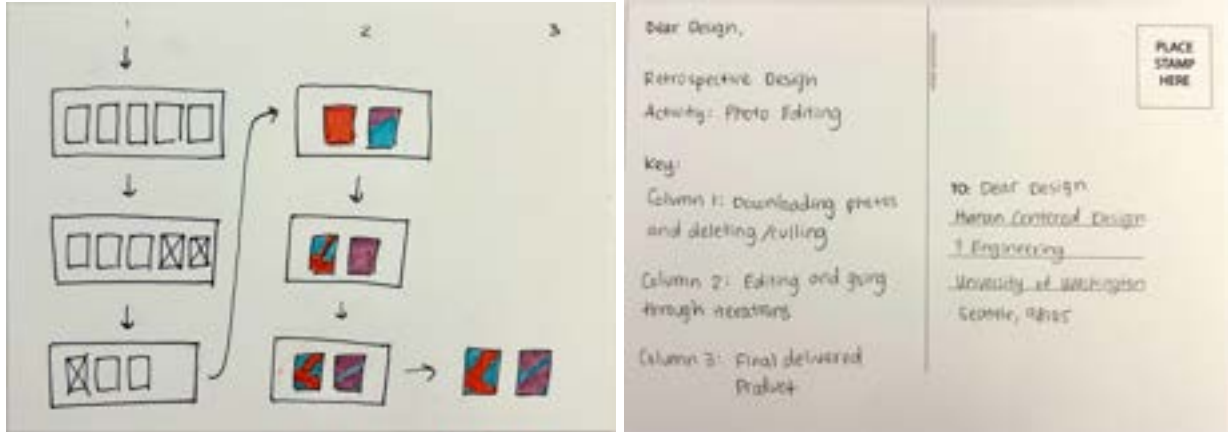
This book will not only tweak your workflow for the better, but it will also help you practice into a version of yourself as a designer that feels a lot more honest, grounded, and more your own.

Best,  
Participant A

# Participant B

## Dear Design: Postcards 1 - 4

### Postcard 1 - Retrospective Design Process



This postcard is an example of a process I might go through when editing photos for clients. In the first column, the series of diagrams demonstrates the gradual process of choosing and deleting photos, which is how I start the process. In the second column, the chosen images then go through an iterative editing process, in which I go through several versions of edits. Then column three shows the final polished images. These three columns demonstrate a general overview of my process.

### Postcard 2 - Design Signature



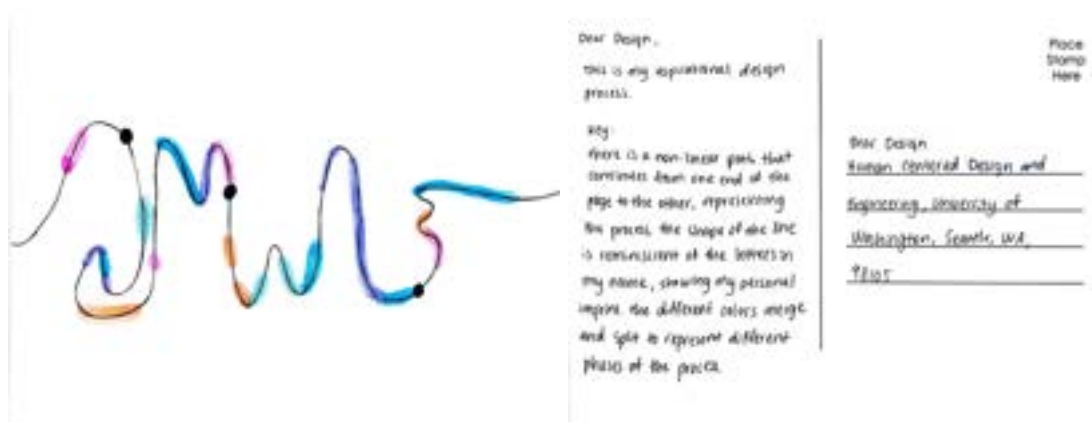
This postcard describes an example design process that I completed. The task in this case was creating a music playlist. Each circle represents a different phase of the process, with the sizes of the circles corresponding to how much time was spent in each phase. The circles are also intentionally placed to indicate the different overlaps and which phases have stronger correlations. For this specific task, I spent the most time generating ideas and the least amount of time in problem definition.

### Postcard 3 - Good Designers Do "X"



This postcard was inspired by Good Designers Do "X", and the card I chose was from Ade Mabogunje. It says "Good designers are themselves! which makes the word "good" disappear". I used different shapes to represent different "types" of designers and placed them in a blacked out region. The center region highlights one individual designer with their unique "Designer" label. The idea of this postcard is to demonstrate how we can stand out as a unique person within a space where there are many kinds of designers, with no one person being the "best", but everyone bringing unique perspectives and value.

### Postcard 4 - Aspirational Design Signature



This postcard is a reflection of my aspirational design process. I drew it as a non-linear path that continues from one end of the page to the other, representing a continually evolving process. The shape of the lines was extruded from the letters of my name, if you look carefully. I did this to reflect how I want my personal imprint to be embedded in my designs. Along the path are different colored segments, which I drew to represent different phases of the process. There are also 3 black points on this path, which are instances that cause me to stop and reflect. Some of the colored segments are on their own, while others merge together, to show how you could be in multiple phases at the same time. I purposely didn't label in the key what each color signifies, because I think it should be fluid depending on the process.

## What I learned about myself as a designer creating these postcards 1- 4

Through the three week Dear Design experience, I reflected on my design process and made some discoveries about what a process is and how I want to be as a designer. In my first postcard, the process I illustrated was very linear, step-by-step, and clearly defined. I thought that this was how design processes were supposed to be, and that this kind of clearly defined process demonstrated the kind of organization and clarity that a good designer should have. However, after engaging in creating my own design timeline, learning about many models of design, and thinking about different design process characteristics, I realized that good designers actually do the opposite. Instead of following a linear, step-by-step process, they mix and match all parts of the process, which results in stronger, more successful designs. Yes we can still follow steps, but I learned that many things can actually overlap and happen at the same time, as reflected in my second postcard. I also learned that there is no exact order things need to be done in. You typically start with defining the problem and gathering information, but if at some point when implementing you realize that the problem needs to be redefined or a different model needs to be made, that is totally acceptable to do. Understanding the process as continuous rather than linear gives me more freedom as a designer to think critically about what is needed to make the design more successful, rather than measuring myself by some imaginary timeline of where I should be in the process and what I have to do next.

## Postcard 5 - Revisiting Aspirational Design Signature in Week 9



This postcard depicts a river with many currents flowing within it. The river represents my whole identity, with the multi-colored currents representing different aspects that make up my identity, including my professional design identity. I chose the river as it has an aspect of ambiguity with none of the paths or currents being rigidly defined, and it also is an entity that sometimes moves slowly and sometimes fast, representing the constantly shifting process of identity development. The rocks in the river represent roadblocks and challenges that had to be overcome and that I had to move past in order to continue growing.

## Second part of the seminar: Weeks 4-9

In weeks 4-9, I learned more about myself and my relationship with design. Through all of the reflection questions, I realized that design concepts can be very personal and intertwined with all areas of our lives, not just design.

With theories and narrative psychology, I learned about how the things that I tell myself in my head can have an impact on how I design. I learned that I have the agency to reframe my perspective and tell a redemptive story. Viewing life and design as a narrative means that storytelling is powerful in creating the type of narrative that we want. With identity development, I learned that becoming a design professional is a daily practice that requires allowing design thinking to become part of who you are. Each week has gradually revealed to me more and more that our design signature and process can become part of our personal identity and how we look at the world. Keeping in my social justice, narrative psychology, storytelling, and identity development are all meaningful in becoming good designers with strong mental frameworks that allow us to constantly grow.

## Wrap-up

I wasn't exactly sure what to expect coming into this DRG, but it was definitely a very personal and individual experience. The first three weeks gave each of us a lot of freedom to experience and explore what a design process is and also gain knowledge from different perspectives. Then based on these experiences, weeks 4 through 9 led us through different topics to continue to reflect upon our design signatures and what design is. I really appreciated how much this DRG allowed us to reflect on our personal identity as designers and equipped us with more skills and knowledge to grow with, I hope I can remember and take with me many things from this seminar.

## Dear Design Letter to Myself

To be honest, grappling with this idea of my design process is still difficult. It still feels kind of abstract and hard to really grasp. Something I know about myself, at least right now, is that I always try to do everything as quickly as I can. Because of that, I find that I naturally don't even want to dwell on or really think about my design process at all. I just want to get to the solution. This desire to accomplish everything as efficiently as possible I think is part of why I haven't let my design identity overlap with my personal identity. It is still difficult, and I am sure there will be many moments where I'm not thinking about it intentionally. But this seminar has challenged me to slow down and be a bit more comfortable with analyzing my design process, and I hope that I have become more confident in myself as a designer. While I know that there is still a lot of growth for me to be had, I hope that this is the first step in becoming more comfortable with my design process and letting myself discover where I can grow.

Sincerely,

Participant B

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## Final Book Suggestions

This seminar as a whole taught me that I can think a lot more critically about my design process and identity to cultivate a design signature that I want. Being more comfortable with ambiguity, taking control of my mental narratives, and accepting the combining of my design and personal identities are the things that impacted me most.

With narrative psychology, I found that it brought up a very encouraging reminder that searching for the meaning behind our low points and difficult situations is very helpful and gives us a sense of purpose and a positive perspective on challenging moments. The things we tell ourselves internally can hold a lot of weight and genuinely make an impact on our life moving forward. If we can consciously take difficult situations and reframe them by telling ourselves that they were purposeful and good for our growth, it will help us to gain confidence and look back on our experiences with a better perspective.

In reading about identity development, I found that becoming a professional requires engaging in an embodied practice, or in a sense, letting your design identity become integrated into who you are as a person through everyday practice. There is more that goes beyond technical skills when developing a professional identity.

Understanding ambiguity as a necessary concept was something else I learned. Accepting ambiguity opens us up to different perspectives, and broadens our scope of possibilities. It is difficult to accept uncertainty, but ultimately it drives growth.

These concepts might be a little bit contradictory in a way. If we focus on the narrative psychology lens, it would mean recommending that the reader be very intentional with their mental frameworks when experiencing their design process, which requires a level of deliberateness and control. Recommending ambiguity on the other hand, means embracing uncertainty and not over controlling the situation. Leaning too much into ambiguity might make the reader feel lost and like the book was not very helpful.

I personally feel that ambiguity doesn't have to be overemphasized. I think the reader will naturally catch on through their exploration of design signatures and many models of design, that the design process can be undefined.

I think for identity development to be impactful, it could be helpful to have the reader go through more personal reflection questions on ways in which their design identity is or isn't similar to their personal identity. I think identifying where there is or isn't overlap will help the reader to see where exactly they can make intentional changes. I would also emphasize that the purpose in building this overlap is to help the reader feel more personally involved and passionate about their design work. Framing this chapter in such a way motivates the reader to be more vulnerable and honest when answering the reflection questions.

Narrative psychology could be structured in a way where the reader actually gets to practice writing down and reframing their personal experiences. Just like we learned with identity

development, embodied practice is very effective, so I think allowing the reader to actually practice the concept will make the biggest impact. For example, we could have them write down events that happened in one of their design processes, and then figure out how to rearrange or reframe the events in a way that tells a redemptive or growth story.

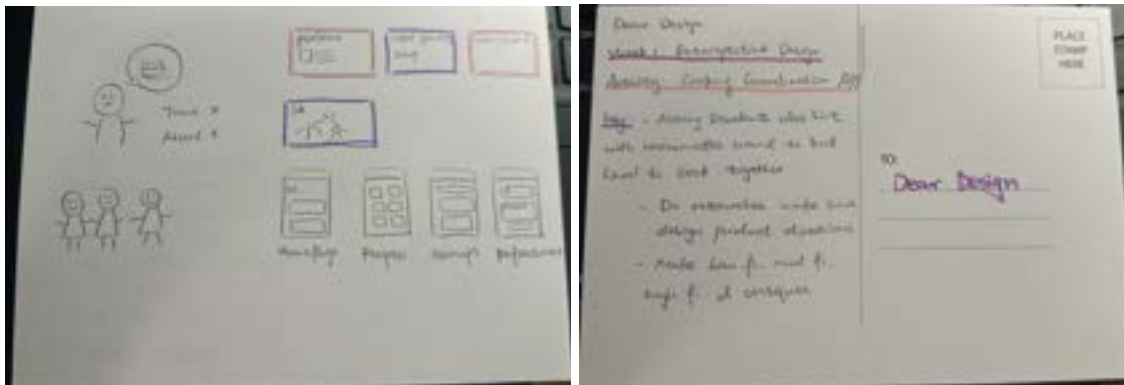
## Dear Design Letter to Future Reader

Design is more than just a career field or a hobby. It is a way of looking at the world and moving through life. To design means to intentionally plan or create something that solves a problem. We are constantly solving problems in our lives, both big and small. Whether it is figuring out how to create a platform that organizes critical medical information or how to get from Place A to Place B, everyone designs. This book was written to help you understand how you currently go through a design process, and to give you the skills to understand that process and reshape it into something that feels right to you. It's not just an academic workbook, but it is a personal reflection process. The more vulnerable and honest you are as you think through each topic, the more impactful this book will be. Our design process is something we have to practice all the time, so why not take the time to really dive deep into it and create a more mature, resilient, and effective design signature?

## Participant C

### Dear Design: Postcards 1 - 4

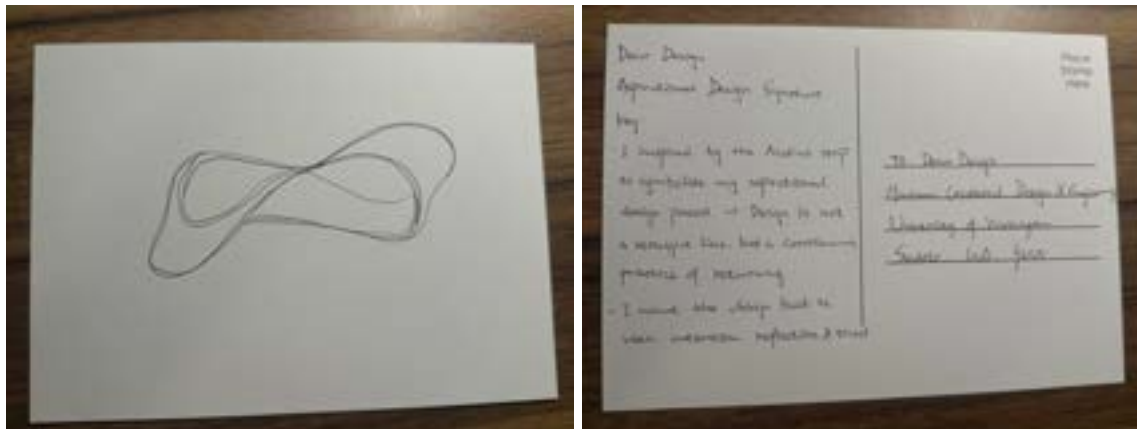
#### Postcard 1 - Retrospective Design Process



This postcard represents my recent project of designing a cooking coordination app. I started by looking at a common problem among college students living with roommates: many of them want to cook together, but it is often hard to actually make it happen. To understand the problem better, I did a lot of research, including interviews, personas, user journey maps, and storyboards. Based on what I found, I decided to design an app to help students coordinate cooking more easily. Then I built the information architecture and created low-, mid-, and high-fidelity prototypes, improving the design through feedback and critiques from peers.



## Postcard 4 - Aspirational Design Signature



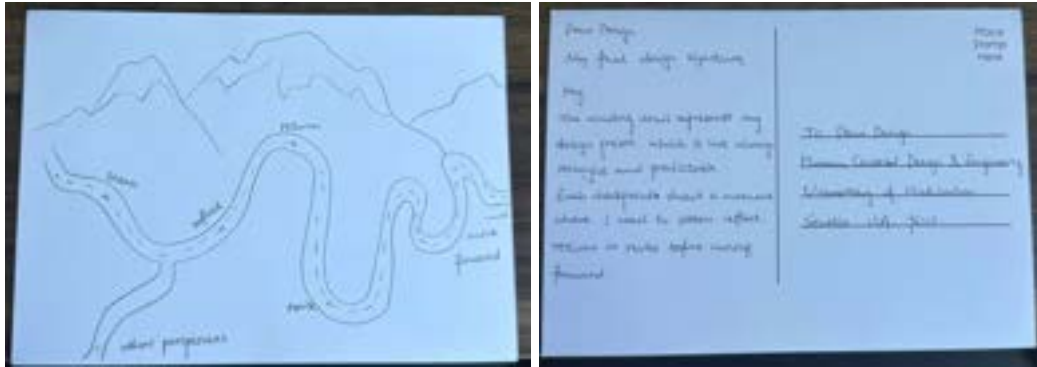
I created this postcard to represent the design process that I aspire to practice in the future. I draw a Möbius strip because it is continuous and non-linear which reflects how I understand design. It is not moving in a straight line from beginning to end, however, design often involves returning and moving forward with awareness. The Möbius strip represents a sense of continuity and return which demonstrates a process that remains connected through change, uncertainty and revision.

### What I learned about myself as a designer creating these postcards

Creating these postcards helped me understand that my design process is more iterative and non-linear than I first thought. In my first postcard, I noticed that when I was making the low-fidelity pet grooming tool, I spent a lot of time moving between modeling and implementation. Many decisions only became clear once I started building, testing, and adjusting the prototype. This helped me realize that going back is not a failure, but a normal part of making the design better.

The other postcards helped me think more about the kind of designer I want to become. I learned that design is not something I do alone; listening to different perspectives can make the process stronger and more meaningful. I also realized that I want my future design process to be more continuous and resilient, like the Möbius strip I drew. Even when the process feels unclear, I want to keep returning to what matters: the user, my intention, reflection, and trust. Overall, these postcards made me feel more aware of my own habits and more confident that uncertainty and revision are important parts of my design process.

## Postcard 5 - Revisiting the Aspirational Design Signature



This postcard represents my final design signature as a journey or trail. I chose a hiking trail because my design process does not feel like a straight path from start to finish. There are moments when I move forward, but also moments when I need to pause, loop back, revise, and return to earlier ideas. The checkpoints on the trail show the actions I want to keep practicing in my process: listening, reflecting, returning, revising, and then moving forward with more awareness. The dashed path labeled “others’ perspectives” shows that feedback and different voices can enter my process and change my direction. This connects to what I have learned about design not being something I do alone. Overall, this postcard reminds me that uncertainty does not mean I am lost. It can be part of how I become more thoughtful, flexible, and intentional as a designer.

### Second part of the seminar: Weeks 4-9

During weeks 4–9, I learned to look at my design process from more than just the final result. The reflection week helped me realize that pausing during the process is just as important as reflecting after everything is finished. I used to think going back to earlier stages meant I was not moving forward, but now I see it as part of testing, adjusting, and making the work stronger.

The later topics also made me think more about the responsibility behind design. Design justice reminded me that design is not neutral, and that I should pay attention to who is included, who is left out, and whose voice actually shapes the outcome. Storytelling also helped me notice that the way I explain my process affects how I understand it. If I only describe my process as messy or uncertain, I might miss the parts where I was actually learning, making decisions, and continuing forward.

The identity development reading helped me connect these ideas back to myself as a designer. I learned that becoming a designer is not only about gaining skills or learning methods. It is also about how I think, how I act, and how my values show up in my work over time.

## Dear Design Letter to Myself

Dear future me,

I want you to remember that design is not only about reaching a final result. A lot of learning happens in the middle especially when the process feels unclear. When you do not know the next step right away, do not panic or rush just to feel productive. That uncertainty might be a sign to pause and look at the problem differently.

Also please keep questioning your own assumptions. It is easy to focus on whether something works or looks good, but design also asks who is included, who is missing and whose perspective is shaping the direction. When there is pressure, try not to let speed become the only thing you care about.

The story you tell about your process is really important. If you always describe yourself as unsure, you might miss the parts where you were actually making careful choices and learning from them. You do not have to turn every struggle into a positive, but you can be more patient with yourself.

I want you to be more confident and keep returning when the work needs it and paying attention to the kind of designer you are becoming.

## Final Book Recommendations

This seminar helped me see that my design process is not only shaped by the steps I write down. A lot happens in the smaller moments that I used to ignore, such as when I feel unsure or when I suddenly change direction. I started to notice that feedback does not just improve my work in a simple way, sometimes it changes what I think the problem even is.

Before this seminar, I cared more about whether I was moving forward. Now I care more about what is happening when I move. The process shows my habits more clearly than I expected, like when I pause or when I try to make a decision too quickly. It also made me realize that design is connected to values of the way I think, the people I include and the assumptions I bring into a design.

One of the strongest things I noticed was that reflection is not just something that happens after a project is done. In class, we talked about reflection as something that can happen in the middle of designing when I pause and look back. That supports my recommendation that the book should include reflection prompts throughout not only at the end of chapters.

Another important finding was that design awareness should include responsibility, not only personal process. The design justice discussion made me realize that when I reflect on my process, I should also ask who is included, who is missing and whose values are shaping the outcome.

The third thing I found is that uncertainty is a normal part of design, but different designers respond to it in different ways. Through the topics like identity and ambiguity, I started to see that how I handle unclear moments says a lot about the kind of designer I am becoming. This supports my recommendation that the book should give readers space to notice their own patterns instead of presenting one correct way to design.

One challenge is that these ideas can feel abstract if readers only encounter them as concepts. Reflection, responsibility, identity, and ambiguity are all important, but they become much clearer when readers can connect them to their own projects. The book needs to avoid sounding like it is just explaining theories. It should help readers actually notice these ideas inside their own design process.

Another complication is that some of these questions can feel uncomfortable. Asking who is missing from a design or why I avoided uncertainty can be hard. The book should not make readers feel like they are failing when they notice these things. However, it should frame those moments as useful places to learn from.

I recommend that the book should feel more like a guided workbook. Each section could introduce one idea briefly, then give readers a small activity to apply it to their own process. For example, after a reflection section, readers could mark where they paused or changed direction. After a design justice section, they could ask who was centered and who was left out. After an ambiguity section, they could write about a moment when they felt unsure and what they did next.

I also think the book should include open spaces for different kinds of responses, like short writing, sketches, timelines, postcards, or letters. The class showed that everyone represents their process differently, so the book should not force one format. It should give enough structure to guide readers, but still leave space for them to make the reflection personal.

## Dear Design Letter to Future Reader

Dear future reader,

This book is not really about giving you one perfect way to design. It is more about helping you notice the parts of your process that usually happen quietly in the background. When I started this seminar, I was still wondering whether I was doing design correctly. I cared a lot about having a clear direction, but I did not always think about what was shaping my decisions.

The concepts that the seminar taught changed that for me. Reflection became something I could use when designing, not just something I wrote after finishing a project. I also started to see that design is never only about the final object or outcome. It includes people, assumptions, values and power. Even small choices can show who I am thinking about and who I might be leaving out.

As you move through this book, try not to make your process look more organized than it really is. It is okay if your design signature feels messy at first. The point is not to prove that you already understand everything. The point is to slow down enough to see your own patterns more clearly.

Some questions may be harder than they look. It can be uncomfortable to realize that you may have rushed past uncertainty or repeated a negative story about your process. But those moments are still useful because they show where learning can happen.

Best,

Participant C

## Participant D

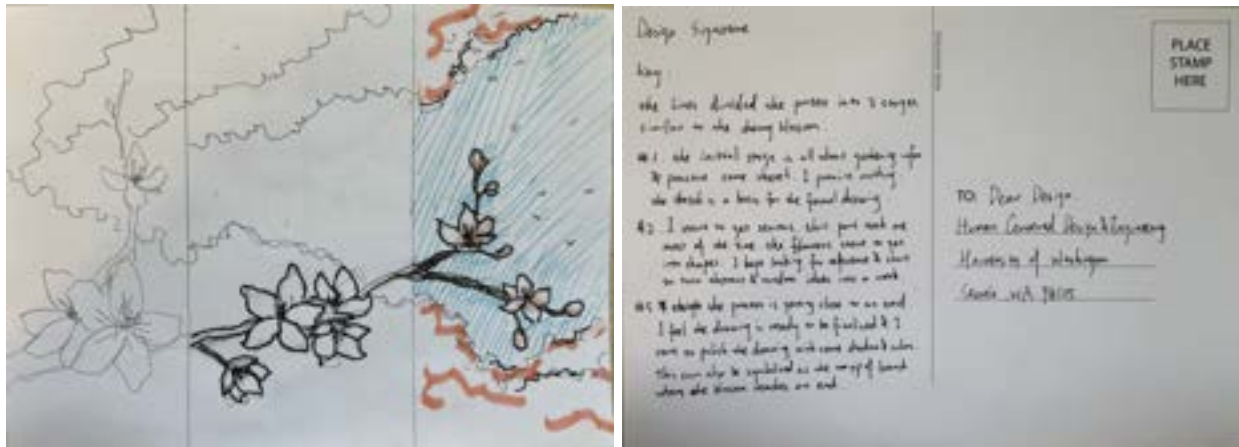
### Descriptions of Postcards 1 - 4

#### Postcard 1 - Retrospective Design Signature



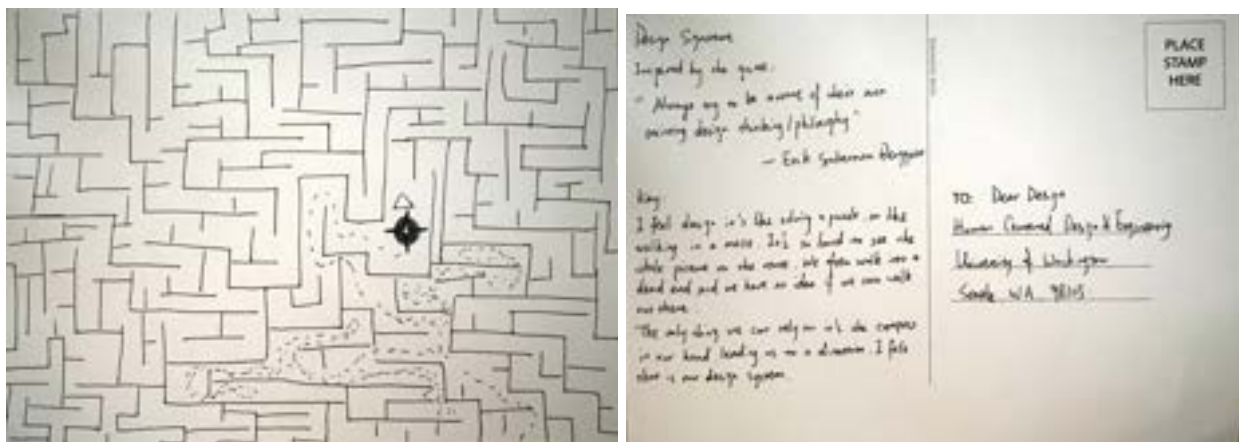
This postcard represents the process of making a new portfolio. The top section illustrates how I draw inspiration from existing works, extracting key design elements and dissecting what makes them effective (represented by red circles). Meanwhile, the bottom section reflects my own original thinking — what I want to include and how I want to present myself to the audience (represented by pink squares).

## Postcard 2 - Design Signature



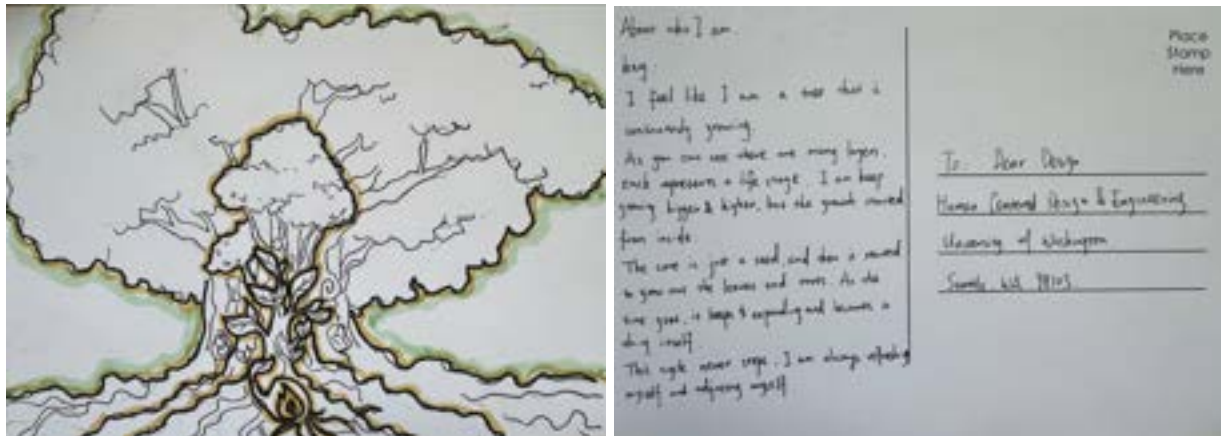
This postcard represents a reflection on the creative process behind a design piece, using the cherry blossom as a metaphor for the journey from idea to finished work. The three lines divide the process into three stages, mirroring the blossom's growth. In the first stage, I gather information and sketch loosely, with nothing promised yet, just a foundation taking shape. In the second stage, I commit more seriously as the flowers begin to form, seeking references and transforming abstract ideas into tangible work. In the final stage, the drawing nears completion and I refine it with shadows and color, much like the tip of a branch where the blossom reaches its fullest form.

## Postcard 3 - Good Designers Do "X"



I feel design is like solving a puzzle, or like walking in a maze. It's so hard to see the whole picture or the route. We often walk into a dead end and have no idea if we can walk out. Yet somehow, that uncertainty is part of the process. The only thing we can rely on is the compass in our hand, leading us in a direction. I feel that is our design system. It doesn't tell us exactly where to go, but it keeps us from losing ourselves entirely.

## Postcard 4 - Aspirational Design Signature



This postcard represents my identity as a designer through the metaphor of a growing tree. Each layer reflects a distinct stage of my life, showing how far I have come while rooting me in where I started. Growth begins from the inside, from a small seed, where roots reach downward and leaves stretch outward in their own directions. As the tree expands, it takes on a life of its own. This cycle never stops. I am constantly refreshing, adapting, and returning to my roots to understand where the next stage of growth needs to begin.

### What I learned about myself as a designer creating these postcards

Creating these postcards revealed that my design process is far less linear than I expected. Even after moving into sketching and idea generation, I kept returning to reference gathering whenever I needed more clarity or detail. At first this felt inefficient, like I was moving backwards instead of forward. But I came to realize that this back and forth was not a flaw in my process. It was simply how I work best, building understanding gradually through iteration rather than in one straight line from start to finish.

This also mirrors something deeper about how I move through life. I discovered that I am genuinely uncomfortable with ambiguity at the start of any design project, and that same discomfort shows up in life too. I have a tendency to try to control things that are ultimately outside of my control. But nature itself is uncontrollable, and life is no different. What I am learning is that the answer is not to grasp for more control, but to stay grounded in my goals and principles, trust myself, and make peace with uncertainty. The discomfort of not knowing is real, but it does not have to stop me. When I focus on what I can guide rather than what I cannot predict, I find that I am able to move forward with much more ease and confidence.

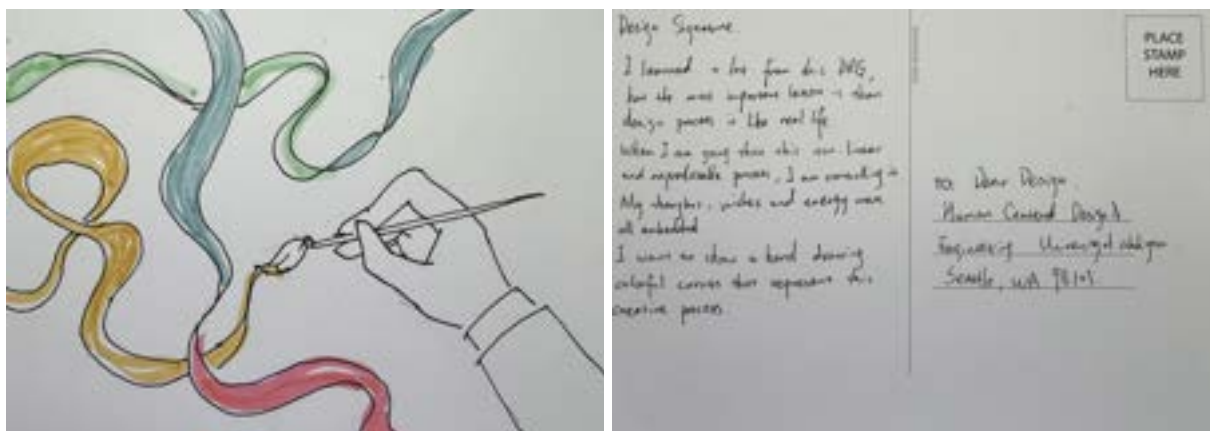
### Second part of the seminar: Weeks 4-9

There are a lot of things about design beyond the design process itself. Through reflection, I can see my growth in becoming more okay with uncertainty in the design process. We learned that we, as builders and users of a system, have a relationship of mutually influencing each other. Then, we studied different cognitive models like "Elephant in the Room" and "System 1 and 2

Thinking." It became more and more interesting to see what we think and how we think through the design process. The Narrative Theory is perhaps the most impressive topic throughout the quarter because it explains why we need storytelling to reveal who we are and express that to the audience. More importantly, the concept of mimesis shows that we are constantly realizing the life we think we live. Then, I feel Identity Theory digs even deeper into that idea. Growing into a professional is about becoming the person. It is about how we think and navigate through problems, especially when there is ambiguity, which is something we face in real life every day.

I feel weeks 4 to 9 are a look into the thinking and behind the scenes work we do in design. Through this process, I became more aware that design is about myself. It is not about the problem, the skill, or a final product. It is about who I am and how I am expressing myself.

### Postcard 5 - Revisiting the Aspirational Design Signature



What I learned from the DRG is that when I am doing design, even though it is non-linear, I am still controlling it. I am putting my thoughts and energy into it, embedding my life in it. It is an expression of myself and my own identity. I want to show my hand drawing curves that represent my own life.

### Wrap-up

Looking back at the whole quarter, I feel this DRG has changed the way I see design and myself as a designer. At first, I thought design was mostly about process and output. But through each week, I slowly realized it is much more personal than that. The tools, theories, and reflections we worked through were not just academic exercises. They were ways of understanding how I think, how I make decisions, and who I am becoming. I came in with certain assumptions and I am leaving with more questions, but I think that is the point. Design is not something you finish learning. It is something you keep growing into, and I feel more ready to do that now.

## Dear Design Letter to Myself

Dear Future Me,

I imagine you are already a better version of who I am today. And I think you would probably smile reading this, knowing everything I was carrying when I wrote it.

Right now, I have a lot of frustration. About my career, about my work, about whether I am good enough or moving fast enough or becoming the right kind of designer. Some days the uncertainty feels productive. Other days it just feels heavy. I hope by the time you read this, some of that weight has lifted. Not because the problems went away, but because you learned how to carry them differently.

I know you probably have new problems now. Harder ones, maybe. Problems I cannot even imagine from where I am standing. But I also know you have grown into someone who can face them. Because you have been doing that all along, one messy design process at a time.

Here is what I want you to remember about this period. It was the time I started to understand that design is not just something I do. It is something that shapes who I am. Every project, every critique, every moment of sitting with a blank screen not knowing what to do next, all of it was building something. Not just a portfolio. A person.

I used to think becoming a good designer meant mastering the right skills and finding the right process. But I slowly learned that the work was never really about the work. It was about learning how I think, how I handle being wrong, how I respond when someone challenges something I made with my whole heart. It was about finding out what I actually believe and then having the courage to show it.

When I was a kid, I thought I would grow up and become someone great, successful, and certain. Someone who had it figured out. But I am already grown up now, and I look nothing like that imagined version of myself. And slowly, I am making peace with that.

So if I could wish anything for you, it is not fame or recognition or an impressive title. I just hope you become the person you actually are. Not the designer others expected you to be. Not the version shaped by comparison or criticism or fear. But the one who listened to her own voice, even when it was quiet. The one who trusted her own eye, even when others disagreed. The one who kept going, not because it was easy, but because something in the work kept calling her back.

That person is already here somewhere. I can feel her.

Keep going.

With love,

Your past self

## Final Book Recommendations

This book should help readers become better versions of themselves, rather than teaching them a more efficient process or how to produce better results. It is not about controlling the steps. It is about becoming comfortable with ambiguity and all the uneasy moments that come with a career in design.

The most compelling support for this comes from two connected ideas: Narrative Theory and Identity Theory.

Narrative Theory says that we actively construct our own life stories through the narratives we tell. This means our design process can feel terrible and amazing at the same time, depending on how we make sense of it. If we see failed attempts as a waste, they become a kind of failure. But if we see them as steps that lead toward eventual success, the same experience becomes meaningful. The way we tell the story of our design work, and even our lives, reveals what we believe about ourselves. Even more striking is the idea of mimesis: what we think and believe can shape what actually happens, because we unconsciously begin living out our own narrative.

This connects directly to Identity Theory. Growing into a professional identity is not a single linear path. It takes going through the design process again and again, across many different kinds of problems. That also explains why design processes look so different from person to person. Each designer brings a different identity, different tolerances for ambiguity, different standards for detail, different relationships with speed and uncertainty. There is no one solution that works for everyone. The process is really about finding yourself and growing into a better version of who you already are. Everyone's journey will look different, and the obstacles they face will be different too. What matters is having the faith to keep going and trusting that the work will get you there.

One place this book will face real tension is in how it handles criticism, both from others and from within.

Designers are constantly evaluated. Feedback comes from clients, peers, users, and colleagues, and it is often hard to receive because we tend to see our work as an extension of ourselves. When the work is criticized, it can feel like we are being criticized. That makes it difficult to separate a reaction to the design from a reaction to our identity.

But the harder voice is often the internal one. Many designers, myself included, carry thoughts like: "This is awful. Others are doing it better. Why doesn't my work look as good? Maybe I am just not talented." These voices are difficult to trace and even harder to quiet. They create real struggle.

This is the tension the book has to navigate. If the book encourages readers to tie their identity to their design journey, it also needs to address what happens when that journey feels like evidence of failure. Without that, the framework risks feeling incomplete or even discouraging for readers who are already hard on themselves.

I feel that the exercises throughout the book should focus on reflection and self-awareness, not just process steps. For example, prompts that ask readers to rewrite a past design failure as a story of learning, or to identify the narrative they currently hold about their own abilities. These kinds of exercises make the theories actionable and personal.

Also, the book should actively encourage readers to share their reflections with others, whether that is a study group, a design community, friends, or family. One of the most valuable parts of this seminar for me personally was the warm and genuine feedback I received from Cindy, Rene, and my peers. That kind of encouragement made me want to keep sharing and keep growing. It reminded me that the design journey does not have to be a lonely one. The book could build this in through prompts that invite readers to share a story with someone they trust, or by framing certain exercises as conversations rather than solo reflections. Emotional support and honest encouragement from the people around us can make a real difference, especially during the moments when the inner critic is loudest.

## Dear Design Letter to Future Reader

Dear Future Reader,

Let me guess. You picked up this book because you wanted to get better at design. Maybe you were hoping for a cleaner process, a smarter framework, or a more reliable way to go from problem to solution. I get it. That is exactly what I was looking for too.

But somewhere along the way, something shifted.

I stopped asking "what is the right process?" and started asking "why does this feel so hard sometimes?" And then, slowly, a more honest question surfaced: "what does the way I design say about who I am?"

That is what this book is really about. Not a formula. Not a checklist. It is an invitation to look at yourself, maybe for the first time, through the lens of your own design work.

You are going to encounter some ideas here that might feel strange at first. Models and theories that seem more like philosophy than design advice. But stay with them. Because what they are pointing to is something most design books never say out loud: the process is not separate from you. You are the process. The way you handle uncertainty, the stories you tell yourself when something fails, the identity you are slowly building every time you sit down to work, all of that matters just as much as the final output.

I also want to ask you something directly. Why do you like design? Not the polished answer you give in interviews. The real one. What is it about this work that keeps pulling you back, even when it is frustrating and unclear and nothing seems to be working?

I think you already know the answer somewhere. This book will help you find the words for it.

You are not going to finish this book with a perfect process. But you might finish it knowing yourself a little better. And honestly, I think that is the most useful thing to walk away with.

We chose design for a reason. There is something in this work that helps us figure out who we are and who we are becoming. That journey is not always comfortable. But it is worth it.

Hope you will enjoy reading it!

## Section 6

### Final Book Recommendations

This section synthesizes the book recommendations that emerged from the Design Research Group, drawing on participants' final homework submissions, the Week 10 session, and survey responses collected during the final meeting.

#### Recommendations from Final Homework and Week 10

Each participant submitted a Book Contribution Memo as part of their final homework, structured around four prompts: the insight, the evidence, the honest complication, and the specific proposal. The following summarizes the recommendations that emerged across all four participants.

##### Participant A

Participant A framed the book's core task as making invisible design structures visible. Drawing on postcards, identity readings, and ambiguity research from Weeks 4-9, they argued that designers' default signatures are shaped by identity, speed, and tolerance for uncertainty more than by explicit methodology. Their principal recommendation was for a hybrid book combining short narrative sections with small, visual exercises (postcards, timelines, reflection prompts), threading identity and ambiguity questions throughout every activity rather than isolating them in dedicated chapters. They also proposed a recurring signature check-in feature, inviting readers to redraw or annotate their evolving design signature every few chapters, and recommended an explicit framing in the introduction that positions the book as an invitation to an ongoing conversation rather than a promise of a perfected process.

##### Participant B

Participant B emphasized the personal and integrative dimension of the book. Their key insight was that becoming a more reflective designer requires allowing one's design identity and personal identity to overlap, a shift they described as difficult but necessary. They recommended reflection questions structured around noticing where design identity and personal identity converge or diverge, and framed these exercises as invitations to vulnerability rather than academic tasks. For narrative psychology content, they proposed that readers practice actually

rewriting design events, arranging them into redemptive or growth stories rather than only reading about the concept. Their honest complication noted a potential tension between the deliberateness required by narrative reframing and the openness encouraged by ambiguity work.

## Participant C

Participant C recommended structuring the book as a guided workbook in which each section introduces one idea briefly and then invites a small applied activity. Examples included marking pauses or direction changes after a reflection section, asking who was centered and who was left out after a design justice section, and writing about a moment of uncertainty after an ambiguity section. They also recommended that the book include open space for multiple response formats, such as short writing, sketches, timelines, and postcards, rather than requiring uniform answers. Their conclusion noted that the book must avoid making readers feel that noticing their own patterns is evidence of failure; framing difficult moments as learning opportunities rather than deficits was central to their proposal.

## Participant D

Participant D centered their recommendation on the goal of helping readers become better versions of themselves, rather than teaching a more efficient process or producing better outputs. They grounded this in narrative theory and identity theory, arguing that the stories designers tell about their own work shape what those experiences actually become. They identified a key tension the book must navigate: if it encourages readers to tie identity to their design journey, it must also address what happens when that journey feels like evidence of failure, including the inner critic. Their specific proposal emphasized exercises focused on self-awareness and reflection over process steps, and they strongly recommended building in prompts that invite readers to share their reflections with others, noting that the warmth and genuine feedback within the DRG had been one of the most valuable parts of their experience.

## Recommendations from the Whole Quarter

As part of producing weekly summaries throughout the DRG, Claude was asked each week what book insights emerged from that session's materials. The resulting recommendations were compiled into a survey of 15 items, each framed as a declarative first-person statement. Participants completed the survey during the Week 10 session.

## Survey Results

The table below shows participant responses across all 15 recommendations. Column headers: SA = Strongly Agree, A = Agree, N = Neutral, D = Disagree. Four participants responded.

Recommendation	SA	A	N	D
Workbook/guided journal format with embedded reflection prompts	3	1	0	0
Readers revisit design signature postcards across chapters as the signature evolves	2	2	0	0
Each exercise includes a design justice prompt (who is centered, who is left out)	0	2	1	1
Readers tell the story of a design project twice: as a timeline and as a narrative	1	3	0	0
The book addresses the inner critic, not just process steps	2	2	0	0
Non-linear, iterative process shown as how good design actually works	4	0	0	0
Theories (framing, fast/slow thinking) as tools throughout, not a standalone chapter	3	0	1	0
Identity content threaded throughout with 'who are you being?' prompts	3	0	0	1
Open space for multiple response formats (writing, sketches, timelines, postcards)	2	2	0	0
Readers encouraged to share reflections with others, not only solo work	2	1	1	0
Space to notice stories without forcing a redemption arc	2	1	1	0
Book states its purpose upfront: invitation to see your design signature, not a formula	3	0	1	0
Design awareness questions as a core repeating feature	2	1	1	0
Social justice and equity content appears early and returns throughout	2	1	1	0
Real design signatures from multiple designers to show messiness is normal	4	0	0	0

Strong consensus (all four Strongly Agree or Agree) emerged for recommendations centered on non-linear process validation, open response formats, and including real design signatures from multiple designers. The recommendation that social justice and equity content appear early and return throughout received one Disagree response, and several recommendations related to identity threading and the inner critic received one Neutral or Disagree, suggesting moderate but not unanimous support. The recommendation about embedded design justice prompts in each exercise received the most mixed response (Neutral, Agree, Agree, Disagree), indicating that participants saw this as valuable but not necessarily as a per-activity feature.

## Title Ideas

During Week 10, participants each generated multiple title candidates. Cindy introduced a constraint during the session: the final title should begin with "Dear Design," building on the book's established frame. The following titles were proposed:

## Participant A

- Your Design Signature: A Non-Linear Journey of Curiosity, Empathy, and Impact
- On the Track and In the Waves: Seeing Who You Are When You Design
- Frames, Loops, and Bench Moments: A Workbook for Becoming The Designer You Are
- Dear Design: Your Design Signature
- Dear Design: A Non-Linear Journey of Curiosity, Empathy, and Impact
- Dear Design: From Fast Tracks to Reflective Waves
- Dear Design: Loops, Bench Moments, and the Designer You're Becoming

## Participant B

- Growing as a Designer: Developing Confidence in Your Personal Design Identity
- How Do You Design?
- The Whole Designer: How to Develop Passion Through Your Design Process
- Breaking the Barrier Between Professional Thinking and Personal Passion
- Design with Intention
- The Grounded Designer: Everyone Can Build Confidence in Their Unique Design Voice
- Dear Design: The Grounded Designer
- More Than a Career: How to Develop Passion as a Designer

## Participant C

- Design is Not a Straight Line
- Inside a Design Process
- Design in Motion: Tracing the Path of Your Design Process
- Design in Motion: A Reflection Guide for Designers in Progress

## Participant D

- Where is design going
- Never the same process
- Made by making yourself
- Dear Design: Are You Still Becoming?

During the session, Cindy asked participants to riff on their titles under the "Dear Design:" constraint. Participant C noted that "Dear Design: Design in Motion" was one natural translation of her preferred title. The group discussed the feel of several options, with Participant B "The Grounded Designer" drawing particular enthusiasm for evoking security, stability, and being cushioned by many facets of identity simultaneously.

## Book Covers

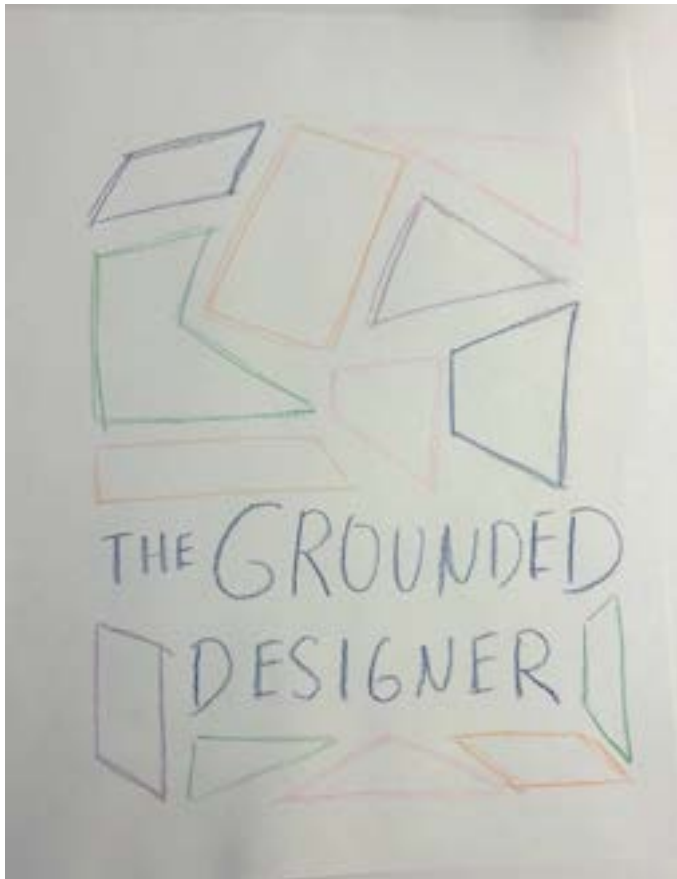
Each participant designed a book cover for the title that they chose from their list.

### Participant A



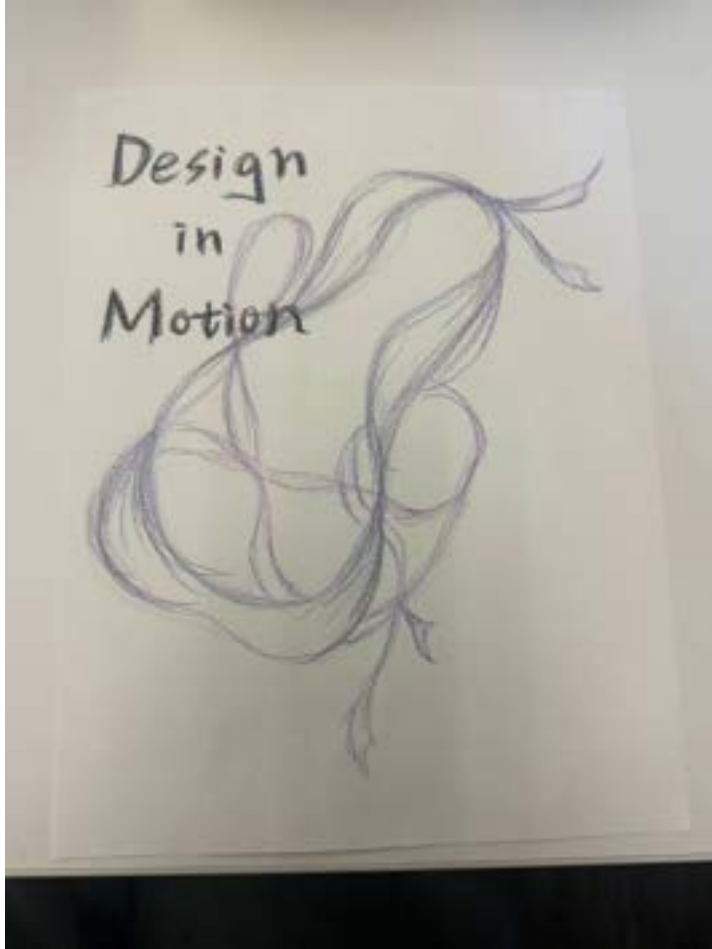
Participant A's cover depicted a blue wave annotated with small icons: hearts, heads, and question marks. The wave traced the evolution from Participant A's earlier design signature, which was fast, linear, and performance-driven, toward a more reflective, flowing one. Faint traces of the earlier signature were intentionally retained to show where the journey began. Cindy noted that the cover's ending arc seemed to flow directly into Participant C's design, which also concluded in a swoop, giving the group's work a visual continuity.

## Participant B



Participant B's cover featured overlapping geometric shapes in multiple colors, each representing a different facet of a designer's identity. After completing it, she noted that the shapes had come to resemble gems, reinforcing the sense of groundedness and security she associated with her preferred title. She described the design as representing how different aspects of who you are as a designer fit together.

## Participant C



Participant C's cover showed flowing wave forms and elements suggesting a Möbius strip, with the title "Design in Motion." The visual was intended to convey that design has reflection built into it, with multiple paths and the possibility of looking back. Cindy described it as beautiful, noting that the swoop at the end gave a sense of ongoing movement rather than closure.

## Participant D



Participant D's cover featured a pencil sketch of a face, partially rendered, with the phrase "Made by Making Yourself" written below. The unfinished quality was intentional, conveying the ongoing nature of identity formation. Participant D explained that the concept reflected both the act of making things and the process of becoming oneself through that making.

## Message to Book Publisher

As a final activity, each participant contributed two to three sentences addressed to a potential publisher, arguing for why the book should be published.

### Participant A

"This book matters because most design education still focuses on methods and outputs, while leaving the designer's lived process and identity out in the shadows. Dear Design makes those invisible signatures visible, giving readers simple, visual tools to see how they truly work. By

combining grounded theory with postcards, timelines, and reflection prompts, the book enables readers to change not only what they design, but who they are becoming as designers."

### Participant B

"This book is important because it develops resilient designers. It takes care of people's mental processes as they design and problem-solve in their life and facilitates a personal exploration that is lacking in design education."

### Participant C

"This book is important because many people only see the final outcomes of design but ignore the process behind it. This book can help readers understand that uncertainty, confusion, and revising are just parts of a design process and it's really normal for designers, not something wrong and fully negative. This book also provides people a way to reflect on their design habits, values, and identities."

### Participant D

"The book matters because it reminds people why they love design and what they can find through this process full of uncertainty. Right now, everyone is stressed about AI taking over, and this book can be the place for people to stop to ask why that still matters and why the human behind the work still matters most."

# Student Impact

This section documents the personal impact of the DRG on participants, drawing on two sources: the Dear Design letters to themselves submitted as part of the final homework that can be seen in Section 5, and the conversation during the Week 10 session in which participants read their letters aloud.

## Dear Design Letters to Themselves

As part of their final homework, each participant wrote a letter addressed to their future self as a designer. These letters were explicitly framed not as summaries but as genuine communicative acts, written in the participant's own voice. The prompt asked participants to be honest about what is hard about seeing one's own design process clearly, and honest about what becomes possible when you do.

### Participant A

Participant A's letter was written from what they described as the end of the DRG, with their current design signature illustrated as a blue wave with hearts, heads, and question marks running throughout. They named the discomfort of having seen clearly for the first time how fast they tend to move, how they had treated reflection as a pit stop, and how often they had framed design as performance under pressure. They explicitly resisted casting this moment as a tidy before-and-after story, calling it instead "catching yourself in the act." Their letter asked their future self to resist crushing ambiguity into a solid problem statement, and to keep asking three questions: Who am I being in this project? Whose perspectives am I carrying with me? What kind of ambiguity is this, and what might it be trying to teach me?

### Participant B

Participant B's letter acknowledged that the idea of a design process still felt abstract and difficult to grasp, and traced this to a strong drive to accomplish things as quickly as possible. They connected this efficiency orientation to the boundary they had long maintained between their design identity and their personal identity, seeing them as separate. The DRG had challenged them to slow down and be more comfortable analyzing their own process. Their letter expressed hope for continued growth, framing the DRG as a first step rather than a completed arc.

### Participant C

Participant C's letter to their future self centered on several reminders: that learning happens in the middle of a process, not only at its end; that uncertainty is a signal to pause and look at the problem differently rather than a reason to accelerate; and that design always carries questions about who is included, who is missing, and whose perspective is shaping the direction. They warned against letting speed become the only concern under pressure. The letter also addressed the narrative self-awareness cultivated during the DRG: the story you tell yourself

about your process matters, and describing yourself as consistently unsure may cause you to miss the careful choices and learning that were actually happening.

## Participant D

Participant D's letter was the most emotionally expansive of the four. Written to an imagined future self already further along, it named a present state of frustration about career direction, pace, and whether they were becoming the right kind of designer. The letter reframed the design process as not merely producing work but building a person, and recounted the shift from believing good design meant mastering the right skills to understanding that the work was really about learning how one thinks, handles being wrong, and responds when something made with genuine investment is challenged. Participant D also named the gap between a childhood vision of certainty and the reality of growing up, and expressed hope not for fame or recognition but for becoming the person they actually are, guided by their own voice and eye, continuing because something in the work keeps calling them back.

## Conversation in Week 10 Session

Near the end of the Week 10 session, participants were invited to read their Dear Design letters to themselves aloud. The exchange produced some of the most personally resonant moments of the DRG.

After the students read their letters, Cindy then shared a brief reflection on what the DRG had meant to her, including two framing stories. The first was the David Foster Wallace fish-and-water parable, in which two young fish swimming through water encounter an older fish who greets them and asks how the water is. After the older fish passes, one young fish turns to the other and asks: "What the hell is water?" Cindy used the parable to describe the DRG's purpose: helping designers notice the context they are already inside, rather than simply moving through it on automatic. The second was a personal story from Thailand in 1989, in which Cindy lost a luck Buddha given to her by a monk in Chiang Mai while riding the tailgate of a pickup truck on a dirt road toward the Golden Triangle. Having accepted the loss with equanimity, she arrived at her destination to find the Buddha still resting between her shoes on the tailgate. A colleague later told her that the reason it came back was because she had been willing to let it go. Cindy noted that this observation had taken her more than twenty years to fully absorb, and that it sits near the center of what the course is trying to offer.

Cindy closed with a passage from Rainer Maria Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet* (1929):

“Have patience with everything that remains unsolved in your heart. Try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books written in a foreign language. Do not now look for the answers. They cannot now be given to you because you could not live them. It is a question of experiencing everything. At present you need to live the question. Perhaps you will gradually, without even noticing it, find yourself experiencing the answer, some distant day.”

Cindy described this quote as advice she would offer if she could give advice to her younger self: have patience with everything that remains unsolved in your heart; try to love the questions themselves; do not now look for the answers, because you could not live them. Her hope for the book, as she articulated it to the group, is that it invites readers to love the questions.

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# Appendix A

## Week 1: Orienting to One's Own Design Process

### Session Overview (from slides)

The first session introduced students to the DRG's dual purpose: building personal design awareness and generating content for Cindy Atman's forthcoming book on design signatures. The session ran approximately two hours, covering introductions, course framing, two hands-on activities, a research overview, and the first assignment.

The class opened with a journey map activity. Students individually sketched their pathways into the course and the assets they were bringing — knowledge, experiences, interests — then shared with a partner before being introduced to the group by that partner. The exercise established the course's tone: personal history matters, and the community of learners is itself a resource.

After a brief pre-survey (to be revisited at the end of the quarter to capture change over time), Cindy outlined the course arc. Weeks 1 through 3 are oriented inward: students engage directly with the design signatures concept and reflect on themselves as designers. Weeks 4 through 9 turn outward toward ideas being considered for the book — reflection, social justice and equity, theories as frames, narrative psychology, design awareness questions, and identity development. Week 10 is a synthesis and wrap-up, though the note in the slides flagged a scheduling conflict with capstone that would need to be resolved. A recurring artifact throughout the course is the "Dear Design" postcard: a 5x7 original visual representation of the student's design process, submitted each week with a descriptive key on the back and a personal reflection. The postcard format draws on the Dear Data project by Lupi and Posavec and on the Dear Design DRG series hosted at [designsignatures.org](http://designsignatures.org). An important constraint repeated across multiple slides: the postcard must represent the design process, not the product.

On AI use: students were told that generative AI is not appropriate for the postcard and writing assignments in the first part of the course, since those assignments are explicitly about the student's own design experience. AI was described as potentially useful for brainstorming, but not for doing the work.

The first in-class activity was a retrospective design exploration. Students were asked to think back on a recent design experience, jot notes about their activities and process, and begin sketching a visual representation. This was framed as preparation for the week's postcard, and reinforced the idea that design is broadly construed — not limited to professional engineering contexts. The second in-class activity was the Oreo tower challenge: small teams of four to five had ten minutes and six cookies to build as tall a structure as possible. One team member served as "ethnographer," marking the team's current design activity at 30-second intervals using a bubble sheet coded with Atman's design activity categories (Problem Definition, Gathering Information, Generating Ideas,

Modeling, Feasibility Analysis, Evaluation, Decision, Communication). Teams then posted their sheets and debriefed: How did processes differ across teams? Did process correlate with outcome? What would you do differently?

The second half of the session was a condensed introduction to Atman's design expertise research and the design signatures concept. The research corpus involved 177 individuals solving 401 design problems across a range of expertise levels, from first-year engineering students to practicing experts to domain specialists such as playground designers and landscape architects. The flagship study used a playground design task with verbal protocol analysis to compare how first-year students, graduating seniors, and expert practitioners allocated time across design activities. Key findings: seniors outperformed first-years in design quality, problem scoping, transitions between activities, and iteration. Experts exceeded both student groups in time spent on all design stages, breadth of information gathered, and time spent scoping the problem before turning to modeling. Expert processes also exhibited a distinctive "cascade" pattern — a characteristic shape of activity distribution over time. These patterns held across different problems, populations, and experimental designs.

Design timelines — visual representations of how a designer moves through activity categories over time — were introduced as the core representational tool for this research and as the conceptual backbone of the design signatures idea. Design signatures extend this further: just as a handwritten signature is personal, varies by context, and changes over time, a design signature is a designer's characteristic pattern of process behavior. The session closed with the framing question: How might your design signature look different across a capstone project versus a two-hour hackathon?

The assignment for Week 2 asked students to use the Design Signatures app (available at [designsignatures.org](https://designsignatures.org)) to track a real design activity in real time, using the "General design (abbreviated)" model and the black background export. From the resulting timeline, students were to create a postcard representing their design signature — an original image inspired by but not literally depicting the timeline — along with a postcard description and a one-to-two paragraph reflection on what they learned about themselves in the process. All materials were to be posted to the shared Miro board and copied into the student's section of the technical report.

## Student Work (from living document)

Five students submitted Week 1 retrospective postcard entries. Across the set, two themes appear consistently: the discovery that personal design processes are not linear, and the difficulty of cleanly categorizing activity into discrete phases.

Participant B tracked the process of creating a music playlist. Her postcard represents design phases as circles of varying size, with size corresponding to time spent and placement indicating overlap between phases. She spent the most time generating ideas and the least on problem definition. Her reflection centered on the degree to which phases co-occur: whenever she was gathering information or generating ideas, she was simultaneously evaluating candidates — and this made clean categorization

feel artificial. The experience challenged an implicit assumption that process phases are sequential.

Participant D tracked the process of building a new portfolio. Her postcard distinguishes two streams of activity: drawing on and analyzing existing works (red circles, top section) and developing her own original direction (pink squares, bottom section). She described her process as non-linear and iterative, oscillating between early sketches and final decisions even after plans seemed settled. An additional factor she named was time pressure: as the deadline approached, she felt stress about whether she could sustain quality throughout, suggesting that pacing and constraint are real features of her design experience.

Participant C tracked the process of creating a low-fidelity physical prototype for a pet grooming tool. Her postcard uses colored lines to represent each design stage. She noted that implementation took significantly longer than expected because many design decisions only became visible once she began building — requiring frequent back-and-forth between modeling and implementation. Like the others, she characterized her process as iterative rather than linear, and observed that building a prototype is not a matter of executing a single plan from start to finish.

Participant A tracked the process of redesigning an appointment-booking screen for accessibility. Her postcard uses an F1 pit-lane metaphor: a main track with colored blocks representing phases by length, and a pit-lane block representing a deliberate pause to check assumptions before continuing. She spent most of her time in idea generation and modeling, with short bursts in problem definition, gathering information, and evaluation. Her reflection identified the pattern as a strength (moving quickly from brief to concrete options) and a potential liability (risking commitment to a direction before the framing and accessibility assumptions have been adequately tested). She named intentional "pit stops" as something to build into future sessions.

## Week 2: Many Models of Design & Good Designers Do “X”

### Session Overview (from slides and class notes)

The second session opened with a review of the Week 1 Design Signatures postcards, followed by the two main content blocks: Many Models of Design and the Good Designers Do “X” (GDDX) project.

In the postcard review, each student presented their Week 1 retrospective design postcard to the group. Participant D shared her cherry blossom drawings representing a three-stage process from initial sketches to final detailed artwork. Participant C presented a pet grooming tool design showing iterations between modeling and implementation phases. Participant B used a Venn diagram to show overlapping and co-occurring design activities. Participant A represented her design process as a Formula 1 track showing the flow from problem definition through idea generation.

Cindy noted that the app-based timeline is just one way to capture a design signature — spreadsheets and heatmaps are also possible — and that the group universally found the app useful. She offered the framing that anchors the whole book: making the invisible design process visible is the point, because once it is visible, you can learn from it.

Students then discussed their postcards in pairs before sharing with the full group. Pair 1 observed that everyone had brought different projects and different visual approaches, with some students treating each process phase as a discrete unit and others representing them as a continuous progression. On their own processes, they noted moving very quickly between phases and finding it genuinely hard to know which phase they were in at any given moment. The practical implication they named: naming the phase forces a slowdown and makes it harder to skip steps. Pair 2 noted visual consistency across the postcards — most used a shared vocabulary of distinct elements such as colors or shapes to mark stages — and identified the divided-stage representation as a clear way to make process visible. One student in this pair observed spending a disproportionate amount of time in modeling and implementation due to the iterative nature of physical work; another described working on many things simultaneously while frequently returning to references out of low confidence. Both pairs named increased design self-awareness as the primary value of the exercise.

The Many Models section established what a model is: a representation that necessarily sacrifices detail from the original. Applied to design, a design process model is a framework capturing what happens when someone designs, with many details missing by definition. The session cited Herb Simon's definition of design as a foundation, "“Everyone designs who devises courses of action aimed at changing existing situations into preferred ones” and noted that design thinking, often misunderstood as a method, is better understood as a mindset involving flexibility, reflection, and human-centered perspective. (Simon, 1969) The Dubberly Compendium — a compilation of hundreds of design models assembled by Hugh Dubberly — served as the hands-on resource. (Dubberly, 2004) Students were assigned sections to review individually, selected three or four models, and shared them in a gallery walk. The debrief noted that despite wide variation in representation, many models share common structural elements: iteration, questioning, and phases oriented toward understanding the problem before moving toward solutions. One student drew explicit connections between UX design and consulting methodologies based on their own background. The organizing frame throughout was George Box's aphorism: “All models are wrong, and some are useful.” (Box 1976)

Cindy was explicit about why this material matters: fluency across multiple frameworks supports a nimble mindset, and knowing various models gives designers more tools when stuck. She also addressed the case where an organization mandates a specific model — shared models have real value for communication, but knowing other frameworks remains useful for reframing.

The second half of the session introduced the Good Designers Do “X” project. Cindy and collaborators asked 35 design researchers and educators to respond off the top of their head to the prompt: when you talk to someone and say ‘Good designers do X’,

what are the top four or five things you list? The result was 180 statements collected between February 2022 and July 2023, compiled into a card deck and published as an HCDE Technical Report (Atman et al., 2025). Students first reviewed a quarter of the deck each, selected two cards that resonated, and discussed their choices; then affinity-mapped the full deck in pairs before sharing with the group.

The pair discussions during the GDDX section surfaced two distinct clusters of observations. Pair 1 noted that the cards covered a wide range of topics — personal philosophy, engaging others, worldview — and that emphasizing the problem before entering the solution space appeared as a consistent theme across contributors. They also flagged the importance of knowing when, where, how, and why specific design tools are used. Pair 2 observed that the deck is fundamentally about people, with many cards requiring perspective-taking. They named ambiguity as a core condition: designers create solutions that do not yet exist and need to be comfortable with that. They also noted the deck’s consistent push toward exploring multiple alternatives rather than committing to one. On how this connects to their own design signatures, students named pattern-finding and connection-making across domains, the realization that design extends beyond oneself to others, and the recognition that multiple valid solutions can coexist.

Two assignments were introduced for the following week. First, students were asked to find a meaningful personal quote to anchor their aspirational design signature postcard in Week 3. Cindy shared examples from her own practice, including a passage from the Tao Te Ching, “We work with being, but non-being is what we use,” and a Kierkegaard line about living forward and understanding backward. (Lao Tzu, trans. Mitchell, 1988; Kierkegaard, 1843/1996) Second, students were asked to create Postcard 2 based on either the Many Models or GDDX content, or a combination. The Many Models prompt asked students to reinterpret a past timeline through attributes from the Dubberly Compendium. The GDDX prompt asked students to choose a card, category, or quote that resonated and create a postcard representing their design process through that lens.

## Student Work (from living document)

Participant B chose the GDDX prompt, selecting a card attributed to Ade Mabogunje: “Good designers are themselves! which makes the word ‘good’ disappear.” Her postcard represents a variety of designer types as different shapes placed in a darkened field, with one individual highlighted at the center with their own “Designer” label. The design choice captures the idea that distinctiveness, not conformity, is what makes the modifier “good” redundant. Participant B’s reflection was candid: she described a recurring tendency to compare herself to other designers and feel outpaced, and named this as discouraging. The postcard became a way of working through that — representing the plurality of designer types not as a hierarchy to climb but as a landscape in which each person’s own identity is the relevant center.

Participant D chose the Many Models prompt and used the process of creating a new drawing as her subject, representing it through a cherry blossom metaphor. The

postcard divides the creative process into three stages corresponding to phases of the blossom: an initial gathering and sketching phase, a sustained middle phase where abstract ideas begin taking concrete form, and a finishing phase of polishing with shadows and colors. Participant D described the middle stage as taking the most time, and characterized the blossom's natural endpoint as a metaphor for the feeling of readiness that closes a creative process.

Participant C chose the GDDX prompt, anchoring her postcard in a quote from Jennifer Turns: "Good designers make design social." Her reflection focused on the idea that design is not something done alone — including many people makes it stronger and more meaningful. She connected this directly to the class discussion themes of multiple perspectives, ambiguity, and the coexistence of multiple valid solutions. Her postcard became a statement of design intention: she wants to keep listening, making connections, and staying open to different possibilities rather than converging prematurely on a single answer. The quote resonated in part because it aligned with her own pair discussion observation that design is fundamentally about people and requires thinking from perspectives other than your own.

Participant A chose the GDDX prompt and combined it with a quote from Billie Jean King: "Pressure is a privilege — it only comes to those who earn it." Her postcard represents the design process as a tennis match, with the left side of the court as the existing situation and the right as the preferred world she is working toward. A dashed rally path traces her iterations. Three benches behind the baseline represent intentional pauses: checking for social impact, standing with others' perspectives, and reframing direction before serving again. Her reflection connected directly to the Week 1 observation that her instinct is to keep rallying rather than pause — she named the three benches as required checkpoints, not optional ones.

## Week 3: Design Process \_\_\_\_\_ and Design Awareness Questions

### Session Overview (from slides)

The third session closed the first phase of the DRG, in which students engage inward with the design signatures concept and with themselves as designers. The session was organized around two main activities bracketed by a check-in, a break, and the rollout of the final postcard assignment: a "Design Process \_\_\_\_\_" activity exploring attributes beyond resilience, and a "Design Awareness Questions" exercise in which students generated and categorized their own questions about their design processes.

After a check-in and review of the Week 2 "Many Models and Good Designers Do "X"" postcards in pairs, the session opened its first major arc with "Design Process \_\_\_\_\_." Cindy framed this as a way to stay big on design while moving toward the DRG's turn inward, noting that the other DRG she runs in parallel uses "resilience" as the process attribute it studies, and asking: what other attributes beyond resilience could be similarly

generative? A curated list of nine candidate attributes was provided: Design Process Curiosity (a process driven by genuine inquiry rather than confirmation of what you already believe), Confidence (the capacity to move forward under uncertainty without freezing or rushing), Patience (resisting premature closure in problem-scoping), Courage (willingness to pursue an unconventional direction, share unfinished work, or abandon a path that isn't working), Playfulness (treating constraints as generative), Integrity (alignment between stated values and behavior under pressure), Humility (openness to being wrong), Adaptability (the ability to shift approach without losing coherence), and Presence (genuine attention to what a design moment is asking rather than running on autopilot). Students chose three attributes that resonated, wrote a sentence explaining why each was compelling, then added their own candidate attributes on sticky notes for group discussion.

After a break, the session moved into its second major arc: Design Awareness Questions. Cindy built this up through a deliberate conceptual chain. The starting point was design signatures themselves, reintroduced as the invisible tracings of a design process that a representation can make visible, and that vary across project types, goals, constraints, and deliverables. From there the session introduced aspirational design signatures (the target of the final postcard) and connected them to metacognition, defined through the standard regulatory trio of planning, monitoring, and evaluating (Kluwe, 1987; Schraw & Moshman, 1995; Schraw, 1998; Pintrich, 2002, 2004; Zimmerman & Campillo, 2003; Zimmerman, 2011). Metacognition was then anchored to design awareness as its precondition: you cannot plan, monitor, or evaluate a design process you are not aware of. Awareness was in turn connected to Donald Schön's reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action and to the broader human practices of self-awareness and mindfulness (Schön, 1983). The culminating move of this chain was to frame design awareness questions as the practical handle on all of it: the questions a designer can ask about their own process to make that process visible and available for change.

With this framing in place, students ran three passes of individual question-generation on sticky notes, writing down as many questions about their own design processes as they could (one per sticky). The session then moved to affinity grouping, with participants clustering their collective questions into emergent categories and preparing to describe their groupings in a gallery walk. As a reference for what this kind of categorization can yield at scale, the slides displayed example questions and categories drawn from roughly 100 questions generated across 25 students from two previous Dear Design seminars. Two organizational schemes were presented: a first-pass set of thematic groupings (Time, Challenges, Intentionality, Emotion and Motivation, plus a distinction between Design Process Noticings, Planned Curriculum, and Lived Curriculum) and a more developed fourteen-category taxonomy of awarenesses (Challenges, Choices, Design awareness itself, Design process activities, Design signatures, Effectiveness, Emotions, Impetus, Inspirations, Intentions, Movement, Outcome, Planning, Shape, Stakeholders, Time, and Values). Five example postcards from previous Dear Design seminar Participants illustrated how a single design awareness question can be paired with a data-collection activity and a visualization that together answer it.

The session closed by introducing the final postcard assignment. Cindy announced that the final postcard (Postcard 3) would be each student's aspirational design signature: a representation they can revisit in the future to draw inspiration from as they engage in design. Students were instructed to anchor the postcard in their design values and to find a meaningful quote to accompany it, drawing on their past postcards, class exercises, and what they had learned from their colleagues.

## Class Discussion and Activities

The pair discussion of the Week 2 postcards surfaced themes that would recur through the rest of the session. Students noted that there was no single right path to becoming a good designer, that following an internal compass or North Star mattered more than conforming to a mold, and that uncertainty was part of the process rather than an obstacle to it. One pair highlighted the visual energy in the postcards (colors, curves, dynamic flow) and read those choices as expressing a view of design as collaborative and pluralistic: the bringing together of multiple perspectives rather than the execution of a single vision.

In the Design Process \_\_\_\_\_ activity, each student selected three attributes from the provided list and a few added their own. Participant B chose Curiosity, Patience, and Courage, framing curiosity as the discipline of taking seriously perspectives that contradict your own, patience as resisting the pressure of deadlines to rush past the work that time requires, and courage as the willingness to reverse direction when something isn't working rather than forcing it forward. Participant A chose Curiosity, Adaptability, and Courage, emphasizing empathy with users, the ability to pivot on feedback, and the willingness to welcome ambiguity and fail quickly. Participant C chose Curiosity, Integrity, and Humility, connecting curiosity to motivation, integrity to sustained focus on a goal across the full arc of a project, and humility to the generative role of failure. Participant D chose Confidence, Courage, and Adaptability, framing confidence as comfort without a solution in hand, courage as the capacity to start over under pressure, and adaptability as flexibility in the face of continually emerging new problems. Students also proposed additional attributes for the collective list: Collaboration, Determination, Empathy, Optimism, Experimentation, Iteration, Trust, Strategic, Openness, Reflectiveness, Tolerance, and Constructiveness. René added Stickiness, Surprise, Failure, Rejection, Possibility, Investigation, Criticality, Joy, and Ambiguity. Cindy added Slowness, Intention, Awareness, Mindfulness, Learning, Doing, Engagement, and Ambiguity.

From the participants:

Participant B: Curiosity, Patience, Courage

- Curiosity: It can be easier and more comfortable to go with what you already know/believe, but good designers are curious about other perspectives, even when they contradict their own.
- Patience: There is almost always a time constraint or deadline that we have to work with, but being able to have patience to not rush through something and give it the necessary time is an important skill.

- Courage: Going against rules or traditional timelines sometimes feels like moving backwards or not making progress, but it is good to be able to understand when something isn't working and making a shift would be more helpful than trying to force something.

Added concepts:

- Collaboration: Collecting insights and skills from others and utilizing them as a team.
- Determination: The ability to continue and make progress toward the end goal, even when challenges or barriers arise.

Participant A: Curiosity, Adaptability, Courage

- Curiosity: drives designers to ask questions like "why", and "what if", making sure there's empathy for users and discovering insights that spark innovation.
- Adaptability: Enables designers to pivot quickly based on feedback and also navigate unpredictable challenges without losing any momentum.
- Courage: Pushes designers for the better to welcome ambiguity, advocate for unconventional ideas, and fail fast without fear.

Added concepts:

- Empathy: Understanding the user's needs, feelings, and context before jumping into solutions. Designing from the user's perspective, not just me on my own as the designer.
- Collaboration: Working with others to shape ideas, get feedback, and build better solutions.
- Optimism: Having the belief that a better solution is possible, even when the problem feels messy or unclear. It helps me as a designer to stay open and keep moving forward.
- Experimentation: Trying different ideas, sketches, or prototypes to learn what works. More of treating design as a process of testing, not guessing.
- Iteration: Improving the design through repeated rounds of feedback and refinement.

Participant C: Curiosity, Integrity, humility

- Curiosity: I think a lot of designs start from curiosity, when people are curious about something, that will motivate them to make thoughtful decisions.
- Integrity: Designers need to focus on one target/goal from beginning to end
- Humility: Learning from failure can push designers to think/design in more dynamic aspects and make the design more concrete.

Added concepts:

- Iterative: do the design process in repetitive rounds and made improvements each time
- Collaborative: involving more people working together
- Trust: creating confidence between designers and users
- Strategic: have clear goals during design process
- 

Participant D: Confidence, Patience, Adaptability:

- Confidence: you need to be confident that you can figure things out when navigating through uncertainties. You would feel comfortable even though you cannot find a solution, because you know you will.
- Courage: sometimes you have taken the wrong path, and switching direction causes more uncertainty and even some risks. You need to have the courage to start over. You would likely hesitate about questions such as “Is there enough time?” “What if that does not work?”, and you need to be courageous to explore under pressure.
- Adaptability: unexpected situations and new problems come up continuously, you need to stay flexible and be able to adjust yourself.

Added concept:

- Optimism: be confident and positive about your work. Even if it looks crappy, you need to stay positive that things will get better.
- Openness: be open to all kinds of ideas at the beginning, and more importantly, be open to others’ critiques and feedback.
- Reflectiveness: constantly look back and try to make them better. Know what’s wrong and why that happens, so we can avoid it next time.
- Tolerance: be okay with imperfections in the process and at the end. We need to compromise on restrictions sometimes, and that’s okay.
- Constructiveness: focus on what we can do about the problem, and be okay with the things that are out of our control.

In the Design Awareness Questions exercise, after three passes of individual question-generation the class produced an affinity-grouped collection that organized around six emergent categories. The Rushing cluster captured questions about time discipline and premature closure (what parts of the process do I tend to rush, what assumptions am I making too early, do I spend enough time on final evaluation). The Unnoticed Areas cluster named the blind spots (is there a part of the process I tend to forget, what am I noticing now that I did not notice before). The Audience and Users cluster asked about whether the real user is being specified and served. The Feelings About Process cluster gathered the affective and evaluative questions (which part is most difficult, how unique is my process, what did I learn from testing or feedback, what impressions does the design leave on me). The Design Patterns cluster focused on shape and iteration (is the process evolving, is it linear, are iterations improving the work, how often should I stop and take stock). The Design Intention cluster turned on purpose and alignment (what is the first thing I noticed starting, what problem am I actually solving, am I still moving toward my intention, why am I choosing this direction). The range of these categories, generated fresh by four students, maps remarkably well onto the Dear Design taxonomy that the session would shortly reference.

## In-Class Reflection Sheets

At the close of the session each student completed a one-page reflection sheet with a drawing prompt (“create a picture, diagram, or other representation that captures something notable from today”) and two short written prompts (“what are one or two main ideas from today’s class” and “what struck you as interesting and/or surprising;

were there any aha moments”). The sheets function as a compact, in-session counterpart to the take-home postcards: shorter, less designed, and closer to the immediate residue of the session. Read together, the four sheets suggest what actually landed for the students in the ninety minutes between the Design Process \_\_\_\_\_ activity and the DAQ affinity walk.

Participant B drew a flowering vine with four leaves labeled patience, courage, curiosity, and determination, topped by a single flower. The representation extends the three Design Process \_\_\_\_\_ attributes she chose in the activity (patience, courage, curiosity) into a grown, living form, adding determination as a fourth leaf and the flower as what these attributes cultivate. For main ideas she wrote “metacognition, thinking abt your process” and “design awareness questions.” What struck her as interesting was “the variety of questions you can ask abt a design process. how thinking abt design is almost like thinking abt your life.”

Participant A drew a lightbulb with rays emanating outward, the conventional visual shorthand for an idea or insight. For main ideas she wrote “design awareness questions” and “qualities that lead to successful design process.” What struck her was “learning more about my design process” and “approaching/thinking deeper into my process (current vs future).” The current-versus-future phrasing anticipates the move her take-home postcard would make: naming the gap between how she currently works and how she aspires to work, and using the aspirational signature to close it.

Participant D drew a circular spiral with arrows showing cyclical movement, labeled “awareness of the process.” The figure rehearses in miniature the cyclical structure that her take-home tree postcard would develop more fully: growth as return, not as linear progression. For main ideas she wrote “what are the quality we need to have a good design process. we could address the design process thru some awareness questions.” What struck her was “I feel like how we design is kind of how we live our life. It’s all about who we are.”

Participant C drew a mind map with “Design Process” at the center, branching to seven attributes: curiosity, integrity, humility, trust, collaborative, iterative, and strategic. The map folds together the three attributes she chose in the Design Process \_\_\_\_\_ activity (curiosity, integrity, humility) and the four additional attributes she proposed during that activity (trust, collaborative, iterative, strategic), giving a single compact representation of everything she contributed to the session’s generative list. For main ideas she wrote that trust is important because it motivates designers to make better products, and that she learned a lot from different perspectives through doing the affinity diagram in class. What struck her was the awareness questions exercise itself, because she “think[s] the awareness questions part is the most interesting one since I learn some questions from the aspects that I never think about from either the classmates or the examples.”

A small but striking pattern surfaces across the four sheets: two students independently identified the same insight about the relationship between designing and living. Participant B wrote that “thinking abt design is almost like thinking abt your life”; Participant D wrote that “how we design is kind of how we live our life. It’s all about who we are.” Both comments land in the “what struck you” column, meaning both students registered it as a genuine aha rather than a summary of what Cindy said. That two

students in a cohort of four converge on this observation in their private end-of-session reflection is noteworthy evidence that the Week 3 content (design signatures, metacognition, design awareness) reads, to students, as continuous with larger questions about self-awareness and how one lives, not as a narrowly methodological topic.

## Student Reflections (Week 3 Postcards)

Four students submitted their aspirational design signature postcards. Across the four, a striking consistency surfaced in both form and framing: each student chose a continuous, non-linear figure (a path, a tree, a Möbius strip, a wave) and used it to reject the idea of design as a sequence moving from a start to a finish. The aspirational processes they represented are all cyclic or recursive in some way, and in each case the student located the generative force in internal intention rather than in a procedure to be followed.

Participant B's postcard drew her aspirational process as a non-linear path extruded from the letters of her name, with distinct colored segments for different phases (sometimes running alone, sometimes overlapping) and three black points marking moments that prompt her to stop and reflect. She deliberately left the color key unlabeled because she wanted the meaning of each phase to remain fluid across projects. Her reflection named the core insight she arrived at through the making: moving between phases is not moving backward; every step is a step forward. She credited the Week 2 Good Designers Do "X" activity with giving her the idea to embed her own identity (through her name) in the representation. Her book-content recommendation emphasized two points: that phases of the design process overlap and resist clean definition, and that the value of having many different process representations comes precisely from their variety, which makes a team's combined process stronger than any one approach would be.

Participant D drew her aspirational process as a continuously growing tree of concentric layers, roots reaching downward and leaves reaching outward, with growth always starting from an interior core. Her reflection named the pattern she saw only by slowing down to look: a cycle of failure and return that she had been living but had never named. The core insight she drew from the exercise was that her power as a designer comes from something internal and continuous rather than from the external circumstances she adapts to. For the book, she recommended three content threads: what makes a good designer (framed as having a personal point of view rather than a procedure), the hidden parts of the design process (the doubt, the iteration, the moment when something clicks), and self-awareness as a developable skill that reveals who a designer is rather than only what they produced.

Participant C drew her aspirational process as a Möbius strip: continuous, non-linear, and structured so that returning is not a setback but an essential part of the form. Her reflection framed resilience as the capacity to return to what matters (the user, intention, reflection, trust) even when the process becomes unclear or difficult. For the book, she recommended including design awareness questions as a tool for readers (the kinds of

questions her class generated in the affinity-grouping activity), and including content that treats non-linearity and return as definitional features of a resilient process rather than as deviations from a proper one.

Participant A drew her aspirational process as a single wave moving across project phases (frame, explore, make, test, reflect), with three icons recurring along the wave: a heart and scale for values and social impact, two heads for holding multiple perspectives, and a question mark and eye for pausing to reframe direction. Her reflection named a specific gap between her current practice and her aspiration: she rides the wave well but does not always pause to ask the questions that matter most to her, so her aspirational signature deliberately distributes those pauses across the whole process rather than leaving them to the end. For the book, she recommended content that makes the hidden parts of people's design processes visible through side-by-side metaphors (tennis courts, F1 tracks, waves), content that combines visual signatures with short reflections on what the designer was thinking at each point, and content that invites readers to make and revisit their own aspirational signatures through concrete prompts and activities.

Taken together, the four postcards and their accompanying reflections offer the book project useful early evidence. The aspirational design signature format successfully elicits personal, non-generic representations of design processes; it surfaces specific habits that each student wants to grow rather than generic virtues; and it produces recommendations for the book that are grounded in what the activity itself made visible, rather than in abstract ideas about what a book on design should include.

## Week 4: Opportunities for Reflection

### Session Overview (from slides and class notes)

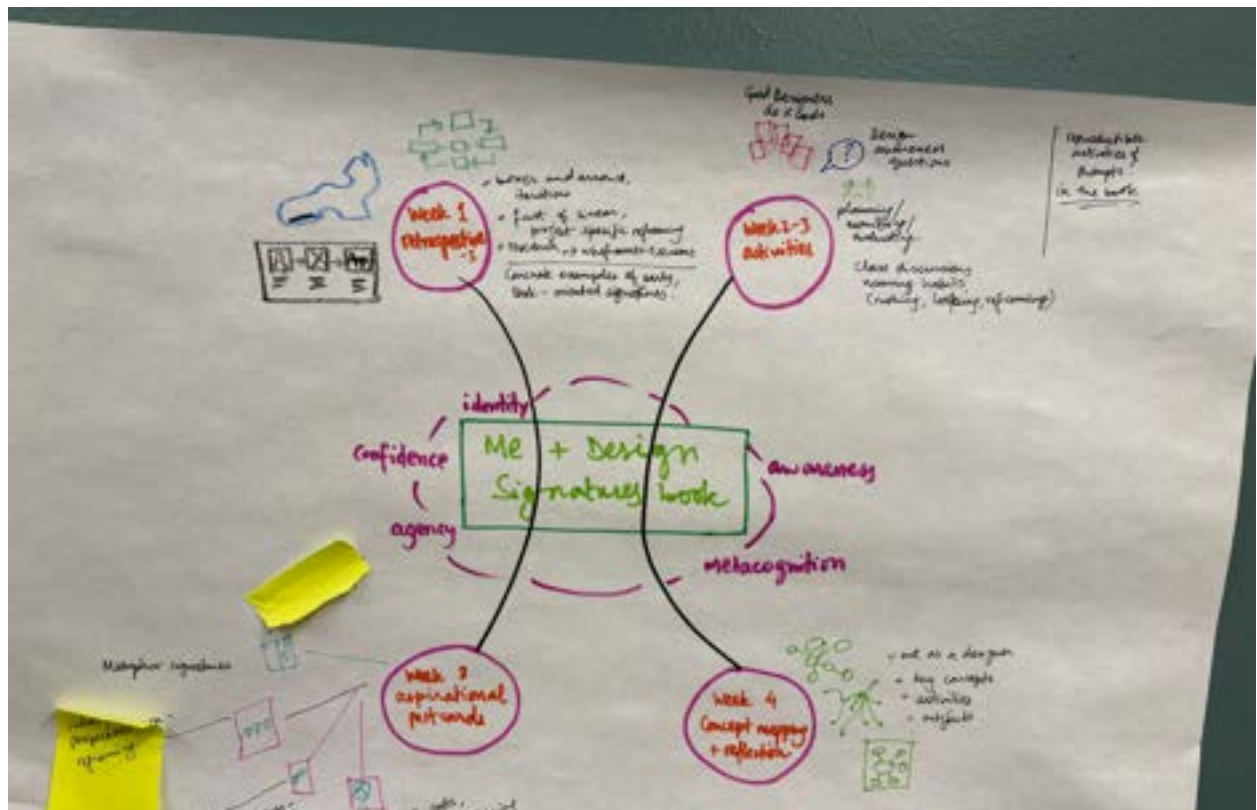
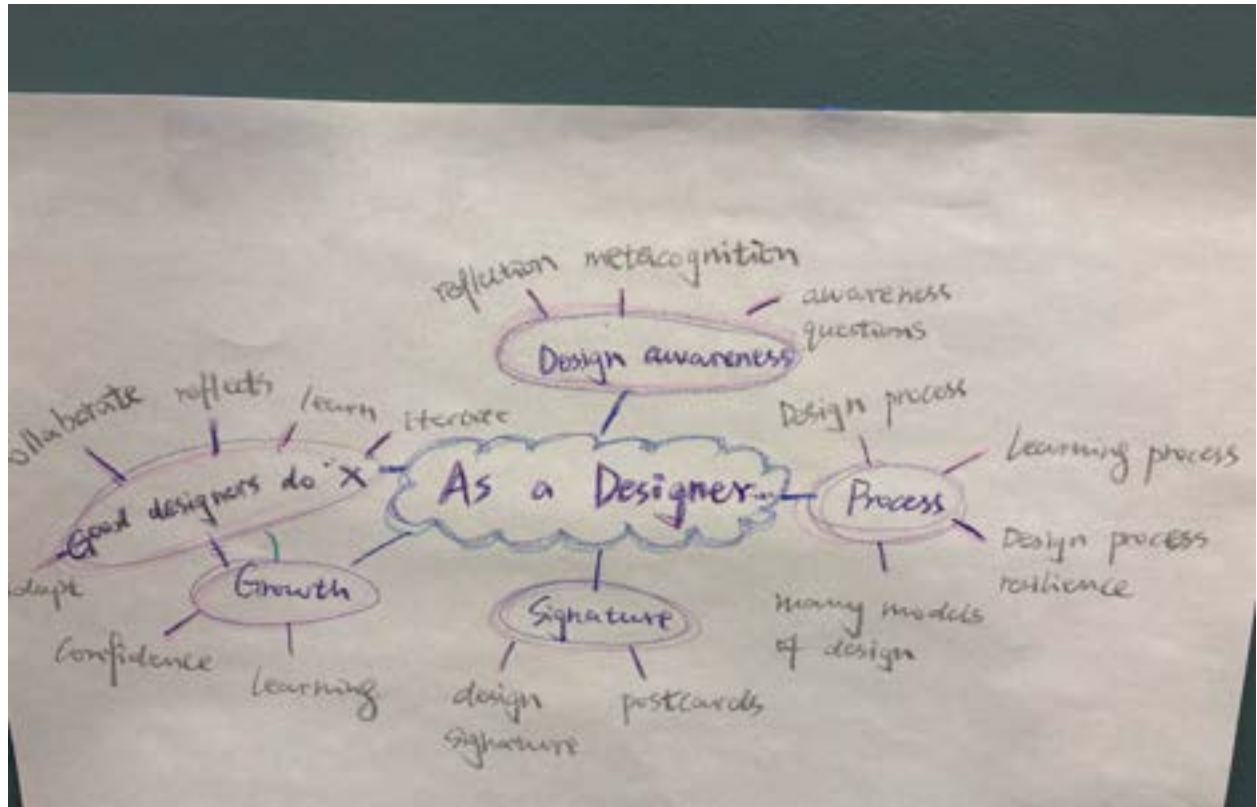
The fourth session marked the transition from the inward-facing first phase of the DRG to the book-facing second phase. The framing question for the session was explicit on a dedicated slide: How would the book convey that design signatures are helpful for design reflection? That question oriented every activity in the session. The agenda as planned ran six activity blocks — postcard share, concept map, post-survey, audience brainstorm, reflection synthesis table, and the closing reflection sheet — though two adjustments were made in the room.

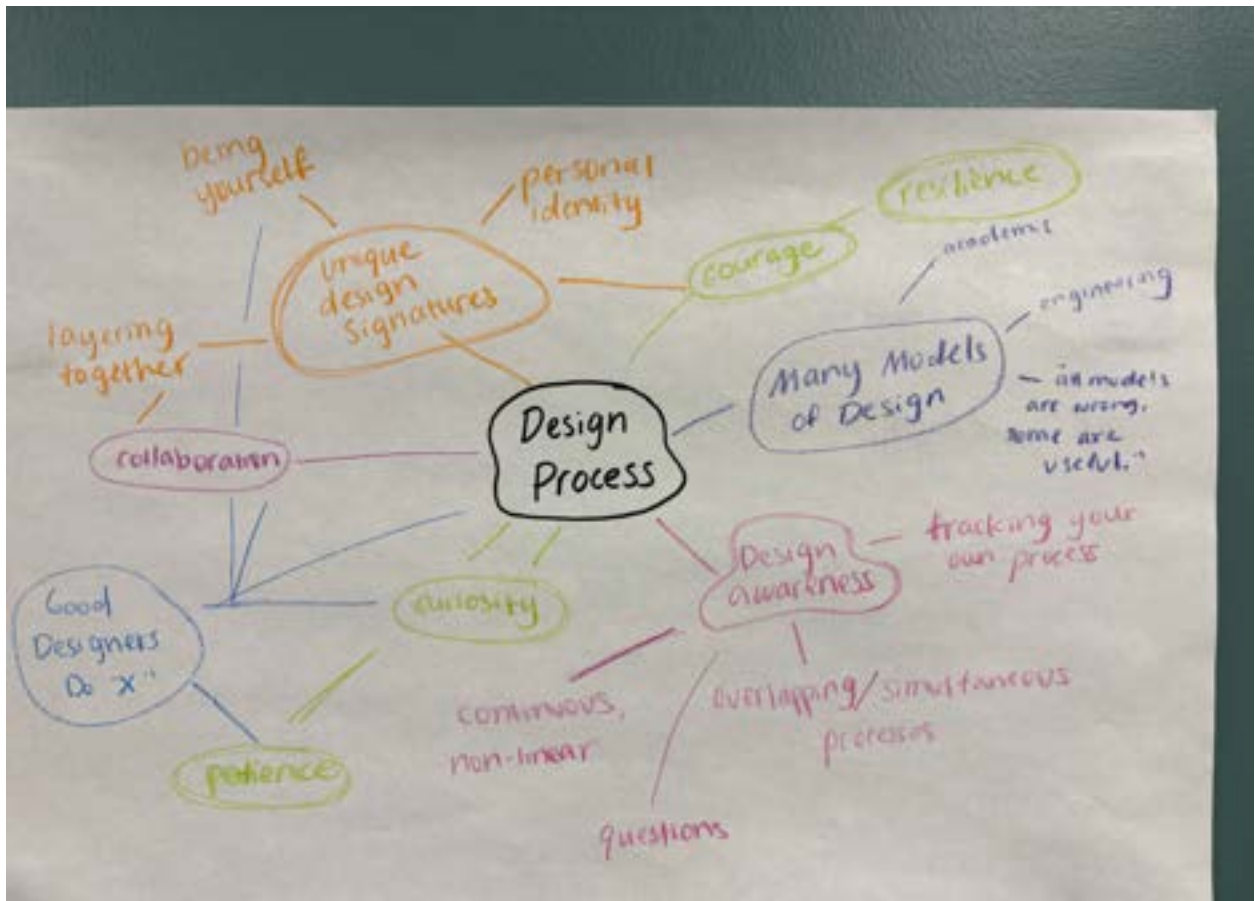
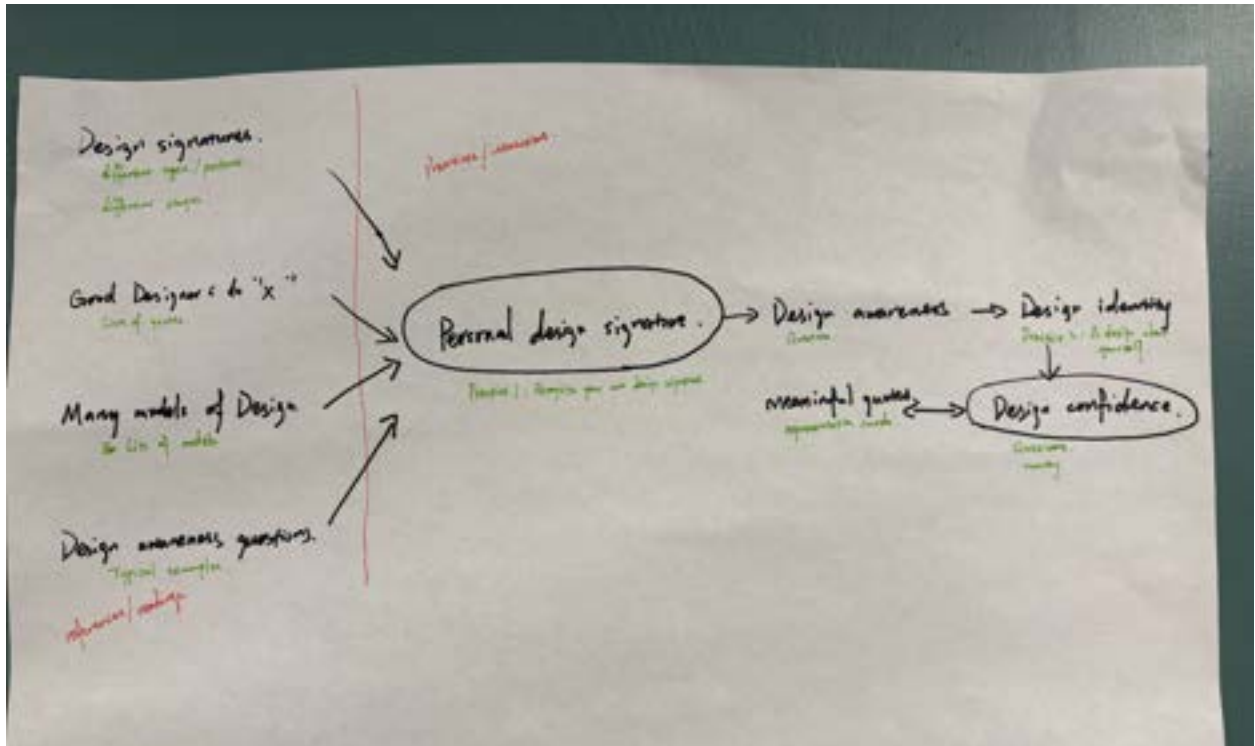
The session opened with the Week 3 aspirational design signature postcards. Each student walked the group through their image, named the design awareness question they had explored, and described what they had learned about themselves. After the share-out, students discussed the postcards in pairs and were asked to compare their initial Week 1 retrospective postcard to their Week 3 aspirational postcard. The two pair groups reported tightly converging observations on the postcards as a set: each represented design as continuous and non-linear rather than a straight path; each showed self-identity or growth threaded through the process; and several drew on natural metaphors (waves, trees, gardens). The retrospective-to-aspirational comparisons each student wrote in the class notes converged on

the same shift: the early postcard was concrete, project-specific, and step-by-step, while the aspirational postcard was abstract, metaphorical, and pattern-oriented. Participant B named the move from "very clear pathway and step-by-step path" to something "more abstract and less concrete." Participant D named it as a move from "messier" with "more design elements" to "more metaphorical" with a "more consistent visual language." Participant C named it as a move from documenting one specific project to representing "a kind of feeling and thought during the design process." Participant A named it as a move from "documenting a specific project and concrete steps" to "overall design patterns using metaphors and loops." That all four students independently articulated the same arc — concrete to abstract, project to pattern — in their own words is a meaningful piece of evidence about what the three-postcard sequence does to a designer's representational frame.

The post-survey followed. Participants retook the same Week 1 pre-survey and then wrote brief reflections on what had changed across the four weeks. The four written responses are unusually consistent. Participant B reported overall increased confidence in understanding her own process, with one specific item shifting from neutral to disagree — her ability to plan her process before starting — because she had come to see the process as fluid rather than plannable. She also reported being much more comfortable monitoring her own process and reflecting on completed work. Participant D moved from "didn't know too much about my design process" and "didn't have much awareness" to "more aware of what I would like to do" and "more confident and chill while I am designing, because I know which stage I am at and what would likely happen." Participant C described an even sharper shift: she had not been sure she could evaluate which stage of the design process she was in or that she could reflect well on her process, and had not even been sure she was doing design at all; she now reported being more confident that she is doing design and can do it better. Participant A reported more confidence in understanding her process, more capacity to monitor and reflect across the work, and a fuller sense of what a resilient design process means. The cross-cutting pattern in these four responses is that the first-phase work has measurably moved students' self-reported relationship to their own design practice — not only their skills, but their sense of having a practice at all.

The concept map activity followed the post-survey. Participants were told that the material covered in Weeks 1 through 3 is candidate content for the book and were asked to create a concept map showing the ideas and relationships among that material as they understood them. The slide deck listed candidate concepts under two headings — "Understand yourself as a designer" (personal design signature, design awareness, design metacognition, design identity, design confidence, design agency, meaningful quotes) and "Various lenses on the design process" (design signatures, design expertise research, many models of design, Good designers do "X," design process resilience, design process \_\_\_\_\_, design awareness questions) — along with their own postcards and memories of class interactions as inputs. Reference examples of concept maps were shown to anchor the form. The class notes do not capture the resulting concept maps verbatim, but the activity registered strongly enough in the in-class reflection sheets that two students named it as a main idea or an aha (Participant B wrote "concept mapping, reflection + signatures" as her main ideas; Participant D named the act of brainstorming book topics as one of her takeaways).





After a break, the session moved into its core block on reflection as a concept for the book. Cindy framed reflection through Schön's distinction between reflection-in-action (thinking while doing) and reflection-on-action (thinking after doing), and through the broader idea that reflection turns experience into knowledge, makes tacit knowledge visible, and serves as a key mechanism for moving from novice toward expert. Several nuances were named explicitly: reflection can be prompted or spontaneous, individual or social, written or verbal or visual or embodied, and quality matters more than quantity. Cindy noted that reflection is often underused in design education.

The synthesis table activity followed. Cindy and René had compiled 51 reflection activities drawn from six sources — 12 activities from the CPREE collection and 39 activities extracted from five academic papers (Davis, 2009; Hirsch and McKenna, 2008; Lousberg, 2020; Maus, 2021; Santana, 2022) — and organized them into nine categories: Ongoing Journal or Log; Written Reflection at a Checkpoint; Design Review or Critique; Peer and Team Evaluation; Team Discussion and Debrief; Goal Setting and Action Planning; Pre/Post Assessment; In-the-Moment Dialogue; and Visual, Embodied, or Making-Based. Each pair was assigned two or three activity groups from the synthesis table. They read each group, considered what the activity asked the designer to do, evaluated whether the table's "Design Signatures Connection" column landed for them, and imagined what a student would actually experience doing the activity. Pairs then prepared sticky notes, presented their activities in a gallery share, and joined a full-group discussion returning to the central question of the session: how the book might convey that design signatures support design reflection. The class notes captured the activity prompts and assigned groupings but did not record the per-group sticky notes or the gallery-share content; the substantive output of this activity lives most fully in the take-home reflections that students wrote afterward.

## In-Class Reflection Sheets

The four sheets capture, in compressed form, what landed for students between the postcard share and the synthesis-table gallery walk.

Participant B drew several small linked concept maps — circles connected by short lines — directly representing the concept-map activity she had just done. Her main ideas were "concept mapping, reflection + signatures." What struck her was "the differences between my first and last postcard! Cool to see how what we learned informed my understanding of process." She is the only student to name the retrospective-vs-aspirational comparison as her single most striking observation, which fits the broader pattern that her own postcard arc has been unusually self-aware about representational choices.

Participant C drew a small hierarchy: at the top, "Good designers do 'X'" with "Awareness" extending below it; from there, two parallel branches — "As a designer → process" on one side, "Signature → Growth" on the other. The diagram threads three weeks of the seminar together (GDDX from Week 2, Awareness from Week 3, design signatures and growth as the through-line) and lands on reflection as the operation that connects them. Her main ideas were

"I learn a lot about the reflection part & I can now make a connection between design & reflection." What struck her was "Reflection process is similar with the design process" — an observation she would develop further in her take-home book-facing reflection.

Participant A drew a thought bubble with a question mark inside it, surrounded by three of the recurring questions she names as her checkpoints: "what are we thinking? — x, y, z," "how do we feel about?" and "what can we do to make it better." Her main ideas were "The importance of being aware to reflect." What struck her was a specific experiential claim about scale: "How much a small part of a project — such as exercise/bad — from reflection during 3x a week activity helps in understanding where we stand." The observation is consistent with her Week 1–3 arc, in which she has been working on building small intentional pauses into a process that otherwise moves quickly.

Participant D drew three small boxes (the three postcards across the quarter, labeled in sequence), an arrow to a smiling face, and a final arrow to the word "reflection." The figure represents the post-survey realization compactly: looking back across the three postcards produces an emotional response (the smiley face), and that response is itself an instance of reflection. Her main ideas captured all three of the day's major moves: "A reflection of the past 3 weeks and seeing my growth. Discussion about what reflection means to us & how could we engage reflection. Brainstorm on the topics if the book." What struck her was "The post survey, it shows me my growth and that is a very strong way to see my growth and difference." She is the only student whose end-of-session sheet names all three activity blocks (post-survey, reflection synthesis, concept map) explicitly.

A small observation across the four sheets: every student's drawing is structured around a movement — Participant B's linked concept circles, Participant C's branching hierarchy, Participant A's thought bubble surrounded by question-prompts, Participant D's boxes and arrows. None of the four students drew a static figure. That formal choice reads, in context, as an unconscious enactment of the day's content: reflection as a process, not a state.

## Student Reflections (Week 4 Take-Home Writing on Reflection)

The four students each wrote a reflection-on-reflection, structured around four book-facing questions (the core insight of the concept; where it belongs in the book; audience connections; additional thoughts) and three personal questions (how the concept changes how they see their own design process; whether it challenges any assumption; what they would want a future self to remember). Read across the four submissions, three findings stand out.

First, all four students independently arrived at the same core insight about reflection: that reflection is not something that happens only at the end of a project, but is itself part of the design process and structurally similar to it. Participant A wrote that reflection is "looking back on a project and checking in with myself while it's still happening" and named, separately, that reflection works because it "doesn't want to live in just one area" of the concept map but plays a role in everything. Participant C wrote that reflection "is not something that only happens at the end" but is "part of the design process itself," and that "reflection is similar to the design process

because both involve going back and forth rather than moving in a straight line." Participant B wrote that reflection is "when we take time to process our actions" and named her own assumption coming in (that reflection is the retrospective work after a project ends) as the assumption the week pushed back on. Participant D wrote that "the design and reflection process are so similar" and named this as the surprise of the week. That all four students arrive at this same conceptual claim, in their own words, suggests the synthesis-table activity and the Schön framing did the pedagogical work they were intended to do.

Second, all four students argued for the same placement of reflection in the book: not as a single chapter, but as a recurring thread woven through every part of the book in the form of prompts, exercises, or checkpoints. Participant A argued that each postcard, design signature, and "Good designers do X" idea could carry a small reflection box — moving the book toward a workbook-like format. Participant C argued for reflection running throughout, with a foundational early chapter to anchor it. Participant B argued for reflection at the start and end of the book mirroring the pre/post survey structure they had just experienced, with embedded short reflection tasks after each activity inside. Participant D argued for reflection as a recurring theme with a dedicated section in a design awareness chapter, and reflection prompts at the end of each chapter at moments of natural growth. The convergence on a workbook-or-prompt-embedded format is striking: four students, working independently on a book they are not writing, all proposed the same structural solution.

Third, the personal reflections show four distinct relationships to reflection rather than a single shared one, and that variance is itself useful evidence. Participant A reported the largest conceptual shift: she had been reflecting on the project but not on her pattern as a designer, and the wave postcard plus the concept map made her habits visible enough that she could now imagine "tweaking those habits instead of assuming 'that's just how I approach things.'" Participant C reported that reflection was already part of her process even when she had not named it — her concern was now that she had a vocabulary for what she had been doing, not that the practice itself was new. Participant B reported the most complicated relationship: reflection comes naturally to her in personal life but feels difficult in academic and professional contexts, and she named her trial-and-error mindset as the assumption the week pushed against. Participant D reported the most identity-anchored shift: she has stopped feeling anxious about her design process being non-linear, has started listening to the thoughts in her head while designing, and has begun drawing on design strategies as a toolkit when stuck. The variance across the four responses is content-rich for the book project: it suggests that reflection lands very differently for different designers, and that book content on reflection probably needs to support readers who are at different points along that variance rather than assume a single starting orientation.

The four-question book-facing prompt also surfaced one structural observation worth carrying forward. Three of the four students recommended a workbook-or-prompt-embedded format for the book; if the book commits to that direction, the four reflection-on-reflection submissions are themselves an early prototype of what the prompts could ask and what kinds of answers they could elicit.

# Week 5: Reflection Debrief & Social Justice and Equity Introduction

## Session Overview (from slides and class notes)

The fifth session was the first session organized around the new pattern that will run through Week 9: the previous week's topic gets debriefed first, and the next week's topic gets introduced second. The agenda ran six blocks — administrative items (tech report format, Participant naming convention, clarification of discussion-leading structure), share-out of responses to the Week 4 reflection prompt, the audience brainstorm rolled forward from Week 4, the Social Justice and Equity introduction with two assigned readings from Sasha Costanza-Chock's *Design Justice* (2020), the Week 6 assignment, and the closing reflection sheet.

During the reflection debrief, each student shared a one-line summary of the core insight from their Week 4 take-home reflection. Participant D framed reflection as looking back to understand the decisions one has already made. Participant C framed reflection as something that happens during the design process, not only after, and as a process of looking back to decide what to do next. Participant A framed reflection as the work of spotting patterns in how one designs (rather than only looking at the project). Participant B framed reflection as taking time to process actions, helping understand how one thinks in the moment and set intentions based on past experience. The four condensed lines are useful as a unit: each student named a different operation reflection performs (look back, decide what to do next, spot patterns, set intentions) without contradicting the others, suggesting that reflection's value can be described from several angles depending on what the designer needs from it.

Two side discussions surfaced during the debrief. Participant C discussed how reflection had helped her recognize the importance of pausing in the design process rather than always moving forward, and named this as challenging an assumption she had brought in (that strong design is forward-progressing). René shared how their architecture training had made them uncomfortable with the nonlinear nature of design, accustomed as they were to a more structured process in which ideas are presented before receiving feedback; through the reflection exercise René gained awareness of their own process and felt empowered to take ownership of it rather than letting external factors (professors, in their training) shape it. Cindy contributed an observation that came up in another design seminar: students who tracked their emotions alongside their logical processes found the combined tracking more effective than logical tracking alone, and productive pivot moments often arise from breaks or aha moments rather than from continuous work.

The audience brainstorm followed, finally running after being dropped from Week 4. In pairs, participants brainstormed possible audiences for Cindy's book using sticky notes and Sharpies. The lists converged across pairs on a recognizable set: design students, junior designers, early career designers, design instructors, career coaches, AI researchers studying design, and general readers interested in personal development as an entry point to design thinking. The

debrief discussed bookstore placement: the design content could naturally sit in design-specific sections, but the personal-development cast of much of the material (design awareness, reflection, identity) could equally place the book in personal-development sections, where it could reach readers who are not seeking out design literature. The group considered titles that would lean each direction — a working title like "Design Your Life" was floated as one example of how the design content could carry broader life lessons.

After a transition slide, the session moved into the Social Justice and Equity introduction. Cindy framed the unit by naming the central question of Costanza-Chock's *Design Justice* (2020): who is design for, and whose needs does it serve? She noted three reasons the book was a good frame for the seminar: it asks the "who is design for" question explicitly, it treats designs as situated rather than universal, and it connects design to communities rather than only to individuals. Students were assigned to read the Introduction and Chapter 1 in class, take active reading notes in the course notes document, and share takeaways twice — once after the Introduction, once after Chapter 1.

The reading discussion produced a substantial set of takeaways, captured in the class notes for both readings. From the Introduction, Participant B named that design justice is concerned with how larger systems shape design choices, with using design to sustain and empower communities rather than exploit them, with intersectional analysis, with prioritizing impact over designer intentions, and with making sites where design happens more inclusive. Participant A named that design is never neutral and always carries politics, that design justice flips who design is for and who leads it, and that intersectionality and the matrix of domination are tools designers should use to see how products land hardest on people at multiple intersections of oppression. Participant D named that design embeds the assumptions of its creators and reproduces structural inequality along race, gender, disability, and class lines, and that design justice is a framework asking who designs, who benefits, and who gets left out. Participant C named that design is not neutral but always reflects power and values, that the people most affected should have real influence in the design process, that adding diverse people to the same old design system is insufficient because justice is about power, and that inclusive design takes effort but the difficulty is not a reason to avoid it.

The terms students surfaced from the Introduction map closely onto the book's vocabulary. Participant B named scoping, intersectionality, sustain-and-empower-versus-exploit, systems, impact, pedagogy, and design justice itself. Participant A named design justice, intersectionality, the matrix of domination, and the idea that artifacts have politics. Participant D named intersectionality, matrix of domination, cis-normativity, and affordance (what a design lets you do and stops you from doing). Participant C named power, equity, marginalization, design justice, and participation. That four students working from the same fifty pages produced four overlapping but distinctly worded vocabularies suggests the readings are dense enough to support multiple entry points without dictating a single interpretive frame.

From Chapter 1, the takeaways turned more concrete. Participant B named the matrix of domination as interlocking systems that enable each other, the affordances and disaffordances of product design, design as potential microaggression, the traditional non-inclusive standard of

who counts as a user, intersectional benchmarks for testing across race, gender, and ability, and the distinction between universal design and inclusive design. Participant A named that design isn't neutral because values and blind spots get built into affordances, that many teams assume an unmarked default user (white, able-bodied, cis), and that design justice goes further than value-sensitive or universal design by asking whose values and how systems like racism and ableism are reproduced through normal design choices. Participant D named that design is political and that intent and impact are distinct: designers make decisions unconsciously when they design for a "universal" user, and the result automatically disadvantages people who don't fit that mold. Participant C named that better design is not automatically better for everybody, that algorithmic bias requires intersectional fairness checks, and that design justice asks us to notice whose values are built into the system.

When asked how the readings relate to the book project, students each named a specific connection. Participant B connected the readings to the testing phase — being more intentional with user choice, and being aware from the start of who is not included. Participant A's connection was the most book-structural: this chapter gives the book space to talk about which values are hiding inside design signatures, not just the steps designers take; the postcards bring out personal patterns, but the chapter pushes the question of who one's default process centers on; for the book, this means treating signatures not as personal style but as patterns that can be intentionally redesigned to embed community-centered values. Participant D emphasized that designers should be aware of the "universal" user in their head, and that design is not purely about aesthetics — designers should be aware of their power and cautious of their bias. Participant C named that the book is about design and this chapter makes clear that design always contains power and is never neutral, which deepens reflection from individual practice toward power, fairness, and who needs to be centered, and which can shape design awareness questions like "who is this for" and "who might be left out."

The session closed with the Week 6 assignment (the same seven-question reflection-on-the-topic prompt, now applied to Social Justice and Equity) and the standard end-of-session reflection sheet.

## In-Class Reflection Sheets

The four sheets compactly capture what landed for students in the move from reflection (the previous week's topic, debriefed) to social justice (the new week's topic, introduced).

Participant A drew a globe with an arrow pointing toward it and the text "THINK ABOUT THE WHOLE COMMUNITY" wrapping around it. The drawing operates at planetary or community scale — none of the other three students drew a figure at this register. Her main idea was "Reflecting on reflection — values in design signatures, not just steps we take." What struck her was: "We should treat signatures not just as personal style, but more as patterns we can intentionally design to embed more community-centered values." That sentence is a precise condensation of the Chapter 1 takeaway she wrote in the class notes: signatures are patterns, and patterns can be redesigned. It also operationalizes the homology claim from Week 4 (reflection and design are the same operation): if reflection produces signatures, and signatures

can be redesigned, then the seminar's tools are themselves the mechanism for embedding equity into one's process.

Participant B drew a network of small linked circles around the word "design" — a conceptual map similar to the one she drew in Week 4 but simpler in form. Her main idea was "design justice — inclusive design." What struck her was a list of distinct observations: that this is "design as a personal development topic, where this research would be found in a bookstore"; that "communities might need to be designed for / included" from the start of the process; "intentional user choice"; and "anyone's different thoughts on reflection." The bookstore observation is unusually concrete — it suggests Participant B was holding the audience-brainstorm conversation in her head as she wrote, and the bookstore framing is a way of asking which set of readers this content is for. The other observations stay closer to the Costanza-Chock content but read as a list of separate threads rather than a single integrated reaction, consistent with the comparatively more intellectual-distance stance her take-home reflection later articulates.

Participant D drew two pyramids side by side, one labeled "marginalized users" and one labeled "privileged users." The figure is the only one of the four to visualize the power asymmetry the readings argue for, and the choice to draw two pyramids of (presumably) different sizes makes the asymmetry the point. Her main ideas were two separate observations: first, the discussion of reflection (carrying over from the debrief block); and second, "Design is not neutral — we should be aware of our power." What struck her was that the social justice content connected to material she had encountered in another HCDE course on theories, that the book could have a general audience, and that "design is not only about design, but also about my life." The cross-course connection (HCDE's theories course) and the personal connection (design as life) sit comfortably together in her sheet; the pattern is consistent with her broader stance across Weeks 1–5 of treating the seminar's content as continuous with larger questions about who she is.

Participant C drew a vertical hierarchy: at the top, "Equity," with parallel branches to "Participation," "Power," and "Marginalization," all flowing down into "Design Justice & Equity," with "Design Justice" at the base. The diagram is the conceptual chain of the readings rendered in five terms — the same five terms she named as her vocabulary in the class notes. Her main idea was the central claim of the readings, in her own words: "Design is not neutral. It always carries values and can not reproduce inequality if we do not question who it is built for." What struck her was an aha she developed later in her take-home reflection: "I learn a lot about equity. I thought it is enough to include more people into the design process, but I learn that we need to include the people who affects most into the process to provide real reflections." The shift she names — from inclusion-as-quantity (more people) to inclusion-as-power-redistribution (people most affected, included in the process itself) — is exactly the move Costanza-Chock argues for, and Participant C names it as new learning.

A small observation across the four sheets: each student's drawing operates at a different scale of representation. Participant A's globe is planetary, Participant D's pyramids are population-level (marginalized vs privileged), Participant C's hierarchy is conceptual, and

Participant B's network is local to the term "design" itself. None of the four drew a figure that operated only at the individual level — a marked shift from the Week 4 sheets, where every drawing was about an individual designer's process. The figures track the content move the week was making.

## Student Assignments (Week 5 Take-Home Writing on Social Justice and Equity)

The four students each wrote a response to the same seven-question prompt used in Week 4 (four book-facing questions, three personal questions), this time on Social Justice and Equity. Read across the four submissions, three findings stand out.

First, all four students arrived at the same core insight, in language drawn directly from Costanza-Chock: design is not neutral. Participant D wrote that "every system reflects the values and assumptions of the people who built it, and once it's built, it turns around and shapes the people who use it." Participant A wrote that social justice and equity are about "noticing how systems like racism, ableism, and cis-normativity are already silently baked into technologies, and then purposely shifting power and benefits toward the people who are most harmed." Participant C wrote that "design is not separate from social conditions" and that design choices can "reflect existing inequality." Participant B framed it slightly differently — as advocating for fair and equal treatment and being aware of social systems that marginalize — but landed in the same conceptual territory. The convergence is less surprising than the Week 4 convergence on reflection-as-design-process homology because the "design is not neutral" claim is the central thesis of the assigned reading; what is more notable is the variation in how each student translated the claim into their own working vocabulary.

Second, all four students argued for the same placement of the concept in the book: integrated throughout rather than confined to a single chapter, with explicit links to the design awareness questions and exercises that the seminar has been developing in earlier weeks. Participant D argued for a section on design awareness with concrete examples and a self-reflection question list, opening into a broader conversation about the relationship between people and technology and ultimately about designer responsibility. Participant A argued for a short, clear, early chapter that introduces the Design Justice concepts in plain language, with the ideas then returning across postcards, questions, and activities — and she explicitly proposed a question to add to every existing exercise: "How does this pattern relate to power, and who is most affected by it?" Participant B argued for social justice as a framework that informs how readers think about their design signatures, asking how social justice and inclusion can be included in the signature itself. Participant C argued for placement in the design awareness questions, with formats centered on questions and activities that ask readers to notice who they center and how their choices connect to fairness. The convergence on integration-via-questions reinforces the workbook-or-prompt-embedded format the four students had already proposed in their Week 4 reflections; what Week 5 adds is the specific class of question — about power, about who is centered, about who is left out — that the book would ask.

Third, the personal reflections show a wider variance than Week 4 did, and that variance is the most content-rich finding from this week's submissions. Participant A reported the largest identity-level shift: she came in with a "pretty individual view of good design" — craft, usability, value for the user-in-general — and the readings pushed her toward seeing that there is no neutral user, that every design choice lands differently depending on where someone sits in the matrix of domination. The line she lands on, "my process has politics too," is the cleanest one-line condensation of what the week did to her thinking. Participant D reported a professionally specific shift: in her previous job, time and budget constraints had pushed her toward designing for an "ideal user" — English-speaking, knowledgeable about local context, often implicitly male — and looking back, she now sees that this was a reflection of bias, not just a practical shortcut. She names her commitment going forward: to treat social justice as inside user value rather than outside it, and to grow into a designer with enough strategic influence to advocate for marginalized users rather than only notice when they have been left out. Participant C reported a procedural shift: she had been evaluating her process by clarity and productivity but now realizes those are not the whole picture; she will pay attention going forward to "which users come to mind first" and "whose situation I may be simplifying without meaning to." Participant B reported the smallest shift, and her reflection is the most distinct of the four for that reason. She writes that she has not experienced much social injustice personally — naming this as a privilege — and that the topic did not push back on assumptions she had brought in, since she already considered social justice and equity to be things good designers should incorporate. She also names a tension: some things are meant to be designed for specific groups, and that specificity can be necessary, even though she acknowledges advocacy is possible within niche audiences.

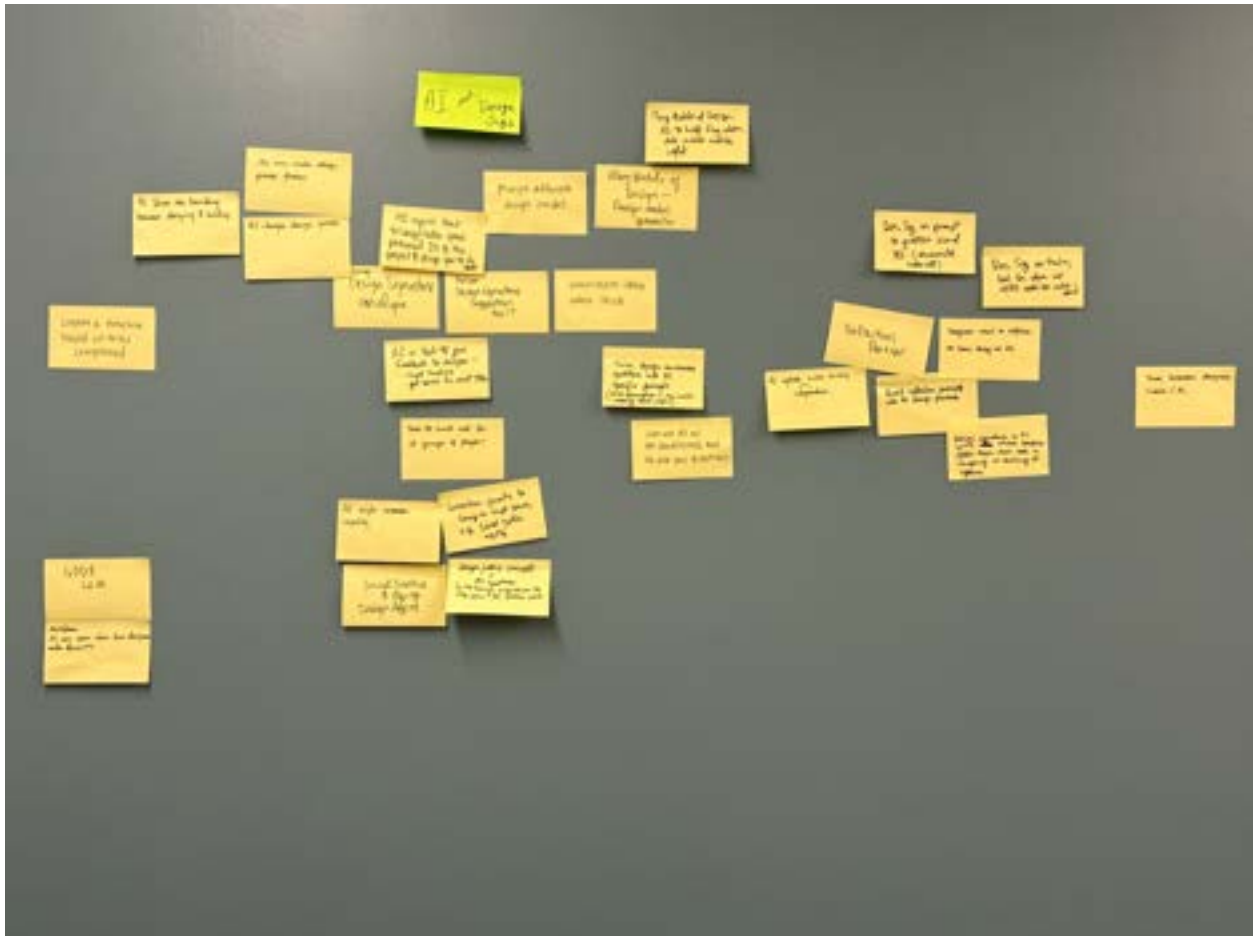
The variance is content-rich for the book in two ways. First, it suggests that readers' relationship to social justice content will vary substantially with how directly they have experienced or reflected on inequality, and the book will need to support readers across that range — readers like Participant B who already accept the principle but feel less personally moved, readers like Participant D who recognize specific past defaults in their own work, readers like Participant A for whom the content reframes their entire approach. Participant D's audience analysis names this directly: she identifies two audiences — readers in marginalized groups for whom the content gives language to something they have already felt, and readers in privileged groups for whom the content reveals what they have never had to notice. That two-audience framing is unusual, and it is the cleanest articulation in the four reflections of why the book's social-justice content needs to do different work for different readers. Second, the four reflections themselves are an instance of exactly the variance the book will need to anticipate. The four-question book-facing prompt and the three-question personal prompt produced four substantively different responses on the same readings, and those responses demonstrate the range of stances readers will bring to the same text.

## Week 6: Social Justice and Equity Debrief & Theories Introduction

## Session Overview (from slides, class notes, and transcript)

The sixth session followed the structure established in Week 5: debrief the prior week's topic first, introduce the new week's topic second. The agenda ran seven blocks: the Social Justice and Equity debrief led by Participant C, a brainstorm on intersections between the DRG's concepts and AI, the introduction to theories as scaffolding for the book, an in-class read of Lakoff's introduction to "Don't Think of an Elephant!" (2004), a brief orientation to Kahneman's "Thinking, Fast and Slow" (with Chapter 1 pushed to homework due to time pressure) (2011), the assignment of theorists to students, the Week 7 assignment, and the closing reflection sheet.

Participant C led the Social Justice and Equity debrief, structuring the share-out around the seven-question prompt the cohort had answered as take-home writing. After each student shared their book-facing and personal answers, Cindy synthesized the cohort's collective stance in one line worth flagging: equity is "a core value, not just an add-on... rather than the sugar to sprinkle on top of the oatmeal." She named the alternative as ingrained societal default and framed the cohort's reading as going against the grain.



The AI brainstorm was substantively generative. Sticky notes were posted, grouped, and synthesized into two categories of AI use: AI as expert or database (analysis tools, design signature comparators, timeline generators) and AI as design partner or reflective tool (reflection partner, design awareness question prompter, model selector, feedback giver). The conversation opened into a thread on "cognitive surrender," Cindy's term for accepting an AI's judgment without questioning. The cohort discussed design signatures as a possible forcing function against cognitive surrender, on the logic that stopping to do a design signature check pulls the designer out of unreflective AI use and into critical reflection; the discussion connected to "slow design" versus fast design. Cindy closed the brainstorm with "I would never have come up with this set. This was really generative."

#	Text on Sticky Note
1	AI can make design process faster
2	AI blurs the boundary between designing & building
3	AI changes design process
4	AI agent that triangulates your personal DS & the project & design you to do stuff
5	Group Design Signature Analysis
6	Personal Design Signature Suggestion tool?
7	Prompt different design model
8	Many Models of Design – Design model generator
9	Many Models of Design – AI to help figure out when data models are most useful
10	Brainstorm ideas when stuck
11	AI as tool to give feedback to designer – next iteration – get advice for next steps
12	Does AI work well for all groups of people?
13	Turn design awareness questions into AI specific prompts (what assumptions / my model making about people?)
14	Can use AI as an awareness tool to ask you questions
15	AI might increase inequality
16	Connection points to bring in Social Justice & Equity
17	Social Justice & Equity Design Agent
18	Design justice concepts – AI systems (use design signatures to improve how AI frameworks work)
19	Create a timeline based on tasks completed
20	GDDX LLM
21	AI can learn about how designers make decisions
22	Reflection Partner
23	Des Sig as prompt to question use of AI (environmental trade-off)
24	Des Sig as thinking tool for when use of AI could be valuable
25	Designers need to reflect on how they use AI
26	Build reflection prompt into all design processes
27	AI replaces human thinking – independent
28	Bringing significance in AI work – area where designers watch their own role in shaping or resisting AI systems
29	Trust between designers / users / AI

The theory's introduction was framed by Cindy as a question of scaffolding: theory grounds the concept (why designers do what they do), shapes how the book communicates it, and works as a forcing function for the book's structure. Lakoff's introduction to *Don't Think of an Elephant!* (2004) was read together. Participant B surfaced the paradox that negating a frame reinforces it and described framing as functioning like personality; Participant A named framing as the mental structure that makes some arguments feel obvious before facts arrive and observed that arguing inside someone else's frame reinforces it; Participant D connected Lakoff's conservative and progressive worldview distinction to her own pre-assumptions in design problem-solving, noting that she navigates problems with a solution already in mind; Participant C took the simpler reading that words shape how people think about an issue. The Kahneman material was abbreviated due to time pressure. Cindy and René revised the assignment in real time, pushing Kahneman Chapter 1 to homework after a brief in-class orientation to the introduction. Theorists were then assigned (Participants D and B took Lakoff; Participants C and A took Kahneman). The Week 7 assignment was given: the seven-question prompt applied to "Theories as Frames," Kahneman Chapter 1, and the Hidden Brain episode on storytelling. The session closed with the reflection sheet.

## In-Class Reflection Sheets

The four in-class reflection sheets show all four students processing both theory threads alongside the day's AI brainstorm. Participant A drew "AI x Design" with a small notebook sketch and a smaller box for AI, named her takeaway as "theories and how it relates to the design signatures," and noted how thinking has shifted since AI became a presence in the design world. Participant B's diagram pairs a System 1 thought cloud (assume, automatic, impatient) with a System 2 box (effort, analyze, slow); her aha moment was the paradox that activating a frame to negate it makes the frame stronger, alongside "framing like personality." Participant C drew a tree branching from "Design & AI" into questions about whether AI treats different groups the same, the trust between designer and AI, and whether AI reflects designer values; her takeaways were that politics is about words and ideas as much as facts, and the two systems of thinking. Participant D drew a System 2 figure with antennae connecting to an "AI" box and a small elephant labeled System 1; her takeaway was the frames concept (people filter information through existing frames in their brain), and her aha moment was the Lakoff Father versus Mother model, which she connected to the "primary caregivers" concept from her current psychology coursework.

## Student Assignments

The four homework responses on Theories as Frames converged on three findings worth flagging for the book. First, all four students argued the theories content belongs woven through the book rather than confined to a single chapter, with three explicitly recommending the format be questions or activities embedded in the postcards and exercises rather than expository text. Second, all four reframed theories from "abstract academic content" to "diagnostic tools for naming what is already happening" in their own design moves, which suggests the book's theory content needs to be operationalized for the reader rather than introduced. Third, the

audiences each student named differed sharply: Participant D pointed to non-designers crossing into design (engineers, product managers, researchers); Participants A and C pointed to early-career designers and students unsure whether their process is "right"; Participant B pointed to mid-career designers dissatisfied with her current practice. This spread is useful evidence that the same theory content lands differently across reader stances, and that the book may need to signal which theory does what work for which reader.

## Week 7: Theories Debrief & Narrative Psychology / Storytelling Introduction

### Session Overview (from slides, class notes, and homework responses)

The seventh session ran seven blocks: a brief Kahneman Chapter 1 from "Thinking Fast and Slow" (2011) share-out, the Theories debrief led by Participant B, an activity engaging with the CELT book collection for format inspiration, a Hidden Brain podcast debrief on narrative psychology, an in-class read of Bruner's "Life as Narrative" (1987), the Week 8 assignment, and the closing reflection sheet.

The Kahneman (2011) Chapter 1 share-out was compressed by time pressure but produced four distinct readings of the two-system framing. Participant A described System 1 as fast, automatic, and intuitive, and System 2 as slow, effortful, and deliberate, and observed that System 2 is "pretty lazy and just kicks in on what System 1 suggests." Participant B said that "we think System 2 is who we really are, but System 1 does most of our daily decisions" and flagged System 1's susceptibility to bias. Participant C framed it through reliability: fast thinking is useful but not always reliable, slow thinking helps check instincts, and design choices may start from intuition but reflection helps improve them. Participant D observed that the design process predominantly uses System 1 and that designers can sometimes slow down to engage System 2.

Participant B then led the Theories debrief. Detailed share-out content was not captured in the class notes for this block, but the four take-home homework responses had already converged on the findings flagged in the Week 6 entry.

The CELT books activity was the most format-generative session the DRG has run so far. The cohort visited the CELT collection which included a variety of book topics and formats including books with fold outs, books with spaces for reflection, unconventional books, and games and brainstormed at least three book-format ideas each. Participant B proposed a double-notepad structure (one for drawing and writing reflections, one for reading), envelope-letter inserts inspired by a dragon book the cohort encountered, flip-open sections with example postcards, and open writing space rather than lined pages with comic-like imagery. Participant A proposed a desktop-sized notebook with iPhone or iPad-sized sketch frames for design timelines, design signature postcards with stamp-style miniatures of different signatures on the top right, and

postcards distributed across all chapters with reflective questions that accumulate into an end-of-book reflection set. Participant C proposed an interactive book with sketching and writing space, small activities throughout, and postcards or fold-out sections. Participant D proposed a coloring book of grid shapes for recording design signatures and time-on-task, a cut-out last page that reveals highlighted central ideas while the full text below explains, and a travel-book format with an illustrative map of the design journey where each stop is described like a tourist attraction. The activity produced more concrete format proposals in one session than the rest of the DRG combined.

The Hidden Brain episode, "Change Your Story; Change Your Life" debrief (Vedantam, 2023) landed on three concepts the cohort all named: redemption versus contamination stories, the dual position of being both character and author of one's own life story, and memory as a tool that reshapes the past in service of the present rather than as a record. Participant B captured the redemption-versus-contamination framing as "where you set the points can have a difference" and connected it to growth. Participant A noted that the same events can be told as redemption or contamination and that those patterns are linked to wellbeing or distress. Participant D pulled the proverb "good fortune follows upon disaster; disaster lurks within good fortune" and flagged a careful caution about not forcing every difficult moment into a positive redemption arc. Participant C tied storytelling to design directly: a mistake or struggle does not have to be seen as failure; it can become part of the learning and the final direction.

The in-class read of Bruner's "Life as Narrative" (1987) produced the most concept-dense set of notes the cohort has generated. Across the four students, the terms surfaced were world making, mimesis (the two-way relationship between narrative and life), lived time, narrative-imitates-life and life-imitates-narrative, canonical life narratives, constructivism, fabula (universal themes underlying a story), sjuzet (how themes are expressed through plot), meaning-making, identity, and agency. Participant A's takeaway from the reading was that autobiography is an ongoing interpretation and reinterpretation of experience and that lived time differs from timelines and calendars because timelines do not capture what it feels like to live a life. The session closed with the Week 8 assignment (the seven-question prompt on Narrative Psychology) and the reflection sheet.

## In-Class Reflection Sheets

The three available in-class reflection sheets (Participant C's was not in the scan set) show all three students processing both the narrative-psychology material and the book-format work. Participant A drew a notebook with reflection labels and book-layout sections, and named her takeaways as "Reflection, having more storytelling aspect" alongside "how autobiography is not just one thing" and "how we can incorporate different activities into the book." Participant B drew a wavy line running from a "start" point to an "end" point with the curve labeled "redemptive," visually capturing the redemption arc; her takeaways were narrative psychology, System 1 and System 2, storytelling, and "books!!" with the aha notes "all the different formats of books that are out there" and "worldmaking in our lives." Participant D drew two stick figures, one labeled "I'm poor" and one labeled "I'm rich," illustrating how the same person can construct opposing

narratives; her takeaways were that "we sort of construct our own life stories" and "there are so many creative cool books," with the aha note "why is storytelling so important: because it reveals who we are and helps people engage."

## Student Assignments

Three findings from the homework responses on Narrative Psychology are worth flagging for the book. First, the cohort split on placement in a useful and articulable way. Participants A and D both argue for cross-thread placement (Participant A as a cluster of tools and prompts woven across multiple postcards; Participant D as a connection between design awareness and storytelling sections that helps readers understand themselves better). Participant B places it as a chapter toward the end of the book for designers reinterpreting a completed process upward toward portfolio presentation. Participant C places it specifically in the reflection sections after activities, as small prompts. This is the first week where the cohort's placement recommendation has had real variance rather than universal thread-throughout agreement, and the variance itself is informative: storytelling is a tool that may legitimately serve different functions at different points in the book. Second, all four students drew the same connection between mimesis and design agency: telling a different story about your design process is itself a design move, not just an interpretive one. Participant B made it most explicit ("not just something I can do but something I should do, because it can actually make my life better"). Participant C, the most reserved of the four in earlier weeks, produced one of her clearest commitment lines yet: "A hard process does not mean I failed or that I am not capable." Third, Participants C and A both introduced a caution against the redemption-arc default. Participant C wrote, "I do not think every difficult moment has to become a positive story. Sometimes the more useful thing is just noticing what kind of story I keep telling myself, and whether that story is helping me or limiting me." Participant A added, "I don't want to force a fake positive narrative on hard experiences." This is the cohort's first explicit pushback on the narrative-psychology framing's optimism, and it is worth carrying into the book as a caveat the chapter or thread must answer.

## Week 8: Narrative Psychology / Storytelling Debrief & Identity Development Introduction

### Detailed Summary

The session opened directly into the Narrative Psychology and Storytelling homework debrief, with Cindy taking each participant's book-facing answers first across the full cohort, then a brief personal-facing share-out limited to one or two sentences each.

Participant A opened the debrief, framing storytelling as a set of tools that can show up across postcards alongside exercises asking readers to tell the story of a project in two ways: one a logical process and timeline version, and one a narrative version that includes thoughts, feelings, and turning points or aha moments. She placed the concept in support of a workbook

or guide format. Participant B then offered a redemption-arc reading: storytelling allows designers to look back at a process and reinterpret it as an upward trajectory toward the final design. She placed storytelling as a chapter near the end of the book, primarily for designers growing careers and portfolios. Participant D, drawing on the mimesis concept from the Bruner reading, argued that the stories we tell about ourselves unconsciously drive our future direction. She placed storytelling as its own section because of how central it is to designer life, and broadened the audience to "everyone" with designers as the focus. Participant C closed the book-facing round by framing storytelling as something that shapes the experience itself, not only describes it after the fact. She placed storytelling as small reflection prompts after activities throughout the book, oriented toward readers seeking their own path of growth. She added a notable caveat: not every difficult moment needs to become a positive story, and the more useful work is sometimes just noticing what story one keeps telling.

Personal-facing share-outs followed in one-sentence form. Participant A acknowledged that her assumption about good reflection (clean sequence, right methods, polished case study) was challenged: the deeper work sits on the narrative layer. Participant B noted that storytelling helps her see mistakes as necessary steps rather than failures. Participant D admitted she has not done enough storytelling in her own case studies and is now persuaded by why it matters. Participant C noted that previously she judged the process by the outcome, and now she would pay attention to the whole process, with struggle moments revealing where she was learning most.

The session then moved into a walk-through of the technical report structure. René oriented the cohort to Sections 1, 2, 3, and Appendix A, naming Cindy as the ultimate reader of the report. Section 3 short summaries, Appendix A long-form, and the existence of Claude reactions and connections-to-the-book sections were each explained. Participant A offered a structural suggestion: rather than separating the planning overview in Section 2 from the recap in Section 3, the two could be combined per week so a reader does not have to flip back to remember the topic. Cindy accepted this as the takeaway and committed to incorporating it.

The cohort then rotated through three rounds of paired feedback using a "roses and thorns" structure, with peers giving one positive and one constructive comment about each other's postcards and tech report sections.

The final activity was an in-class read of Adams et al.'s "Being a professional: Three lenses into design thinking, acting, and being," (2011) with fifteen minutes of silent reading followed by a takeaways discussion. Participant C noted that design is not only about skills or methods but involves identity, that there is no single path to becoming a designer, and that ambiguity can be a source of creativity; she connected this to design signatures as multiple ways to see the process. Participant D extended this with "way of being," "embodied understanding," and "multiple trajectories," noting that experts increase ambiguity and question the problem rather than only solving it. Participant B noted that embodied practice resonated with her dance background and emphasized professional identity as something built through doing over time. Participant A produced the most elaborated reading, identifying knowing, acting, and being as a triad, calling out the six design categories (evidence-based decision making, organized

translation, personal synthesis, intentional progression, directed creative exploration, freedom) as a landscape rather than a single ladder, and proposing that the book ask readers "who are you being as a designer?" alongside prompts about which of the six modes they default to.

The session closed with René introducing the Week 9 assignment: the same seven-question prompt applied to Identity Development. She noted that the Adams reading should have primed the cohort. She also flagged the broader Week 9 expectation: a final design signature update in the tech report, with a target of completing Weeks 4 through 8 content (Week 9 itself, on ambiguity, would be too tight to include). The reflection sheet was distributed with the new "maybe use this content in publication" consent line at the bottom.

## Takeaways

Three findings from the session are worth carrying into the book. First, the cohort converged on a two-layer structure of design stories (logical process plus narrative meaning) and treated storytelling as a tool that should operate across the surface and depth of design experience. Second, Participant C produced the cohort's first explicit counter-voice to a framework, resisting the redemption-arc default and offering a more austere alternative of noticing the story without forcing positivity. Third, the Adams et al. discussion produced unusually strong vocabulary convergence across all four participants on identity terms (way of being, knowing/acting/being, embodied practice, multiple trajectories), priming the Week 9 identity homework well.

## Week 9: Ambiguity

Week 9, held May 27, 2026, was organized around two intertwined threads: closing out the Identity Development topic from Week 8 and introducing Ambiguity as the final conceptual topic of the quarter.

Identity Development responses were shared. The group worked through book-facing questions first, then circled back for the personal questions, since the personal reflections required more time to formulate. Participant D opened with the framing that becoming a professional is not about accumulating technical skills but about becoming a particular kind of person through the design process — a framing she said had given her language for an observation she had carried from industry, that senior designers and engineers often do not perform hands-on production work yet remain unambiguously professional because their work is judgment and decision-making rather than tool fluency. Cindy connected this to the long-running pedagogical tension in engineering education between teaching specific software packages and teaching the conceptual thinking underneath them, and noted how Participant D's earlier accounts of harsh undergraduate critiques sit differently in light of this distinction.

Participant C framed identity development as the recognition that becoming a designer is not just learning skills but shaping how one approaches uncertainty and one's own growth. She noted a shift in how she sees her own postcards: an awareness that her process had defaulted to fast, structured, outcome-focused movement with quick reflection pit stops, and a new

question about whether that is who she actually wants to be in her work. She named the discomfort of having to own the identity side of design rather than hiding behind technical work, and said she wanted to remember that there is no single real designer she has to become — that there are many paths and she has some authorship over hers. Cindy named the through-line as expertise as a stance and a way of being rather than as method accumulation.

Participant A characterized design as a way of being rather than a skill set and proposed identity development as workbook-style guidance with prompts for self-reflection rather than a single chapter. Participant B defined identity development as cultivating unique qualities and design expertise, considering placement at either the beginning or end of the book without committing. The placement question surfaced a genuine unresolved tension that was acknowledged but not adjudicated in session.

Participants then shared their Postcard 5, where they revisited their aspirational design signatures. . Participant A described an updated design signature as one continuous wave, integrating earlier metaphors of the Formula One track and tennis court into a single nonlinear loop with values, perspectives, and reflection woven through rather than placed beside the path. Participant D drew herself with her own hand inside the design process — a homuncular representation of being embedded in her own process of looking at her process. Participant C drew a hiking trail with explicit checkpoints for listening, reflecting, returning, and revising, framing the design process as movement forward with deliberate pauses. Participant B drew a river of many currents to represent her identity, with the river itself standing for the design identity and the rocks representing roadblocks; she chose the river because it is itself ambiguous, sometimes slow and sometimes fast. Cindy noted that the postcards landed as a coherent set with overlapping themes but distinct individual voices.

René then led the ambiguity activity. Before introducing the research, they asked each participant what they thought ambiguity meant for design. The responses were notably more nuanced than what the larger study had found in surveys: Participant B framed ambiguity as a signal that a pivot may be needed and as the openness required to take in user research that contradicts initial assumptions. Participant A described it as the willingness to release attachment to a fixed idea and consider others' contributions. Participant D characterized it as the inescapable subjectivity of design — a state in which no answer is unambiguously right or wrong. Participant C characterized ambiguity as the condition under which more possibilities become available. René noted that this set of responses was substantially more developed than the responses the research team had received from a separate cohort of thirteen master's students, who had largely characterized ambiguity as uncertainty they did not like.

René then presented the From Instrumental to Existential research poster (Capella, Trinkaus, Beach, Fox). The first study followed twelve HCDE master's students across UX and Transition Design projects in consecutive quarters. The competencies the students used did not change; their deployment did. In UX, ambiguity was instrumental — scoped, narrowed, and resolved in order to move forward toward a defined endpoint. In Transition Design, ambiguity intensified and persisted; students encountered systems-level territory without clear endpoints, more strategic and systemic thinking, and a sense of endless information without resolution. The second study

follows thirteen designers through capstone using the MSTAT-II as a quantitative measure of ambiguity tolerance, paired with interviews and diary studies. René noted that ambiguity tolerance and ambiguity preference are separable: one can dislike ambiguity but still tolerate it well by having tools to scope it, or be highly tolerant without scoping tools and instead allowing things to emerge.

The session framing for the research was direct. Ambiguity is the background condition of design, not an incidental disturbance. How a designer navigates it is, in this framing, a core component of their design signature.

The group then took a field trip to view convergent and divergent question timelines from an earlier study of engineering and playground designers. Cindy walked the group through individual timelines showing how different designers lingered in or quickly closed off ambiguity while producing comparably high-quality final designs — a concrete illustration of the design-signature claim that multiple distinct paths can yield quality work.

After the break, participants brainstormed in class notes how the ambiguity concept could fit into the book. Participant C proposed it as a small activity or short chapter with reflective prompts about how readers behave when uncertain. Participant A proposed it as a quiet lens running underneath the entire book, with small embedded prompts ("what kind of ambiguity is this — instrumental or existential?") tying it directly to identity development. Participant D proposed marking when ambiguity tends to occur across a design process and pairing it with the identity topic to examine how different professionals handle it. Participant B argued for ambiguity as something woven implicitly through all activities rather than named explicitly, on the grounds that the cohort itself had absorbed the idea without ever being told it directly.

The session then moved into a full-quarter review. Cindy framed this segment with explicit gratitude to participants for taking a risk on an unfamiliar format, and noted that she had been tearing up in preparation as she returned to the transcripts and saw how participants' self-reflection had deepened with each successive topic. She named the skills she had observed developing — design awareness, metacognition, and the use of agentic language in describing oneself as a designer (a reflector, an embracer of ambiguity, rather than a passive recipient of process). Participants listed ten things they had noticed across the quarter and starred their most impactful. Participant B starred the recognition that there is no single way to do design, the psychology-design connection, and the overlap between personal and design identity. Participant A starred reflection as more than a pit stop, ambiguity as a signal rather than a problem, and the ubiquity of frames. Participant C starred non-linear design process, accepting uncertainties, and identity development. Participant D starred the discovery that what she feels is also what others feel, the subjectivity of perception, and the self-other-world relationship.

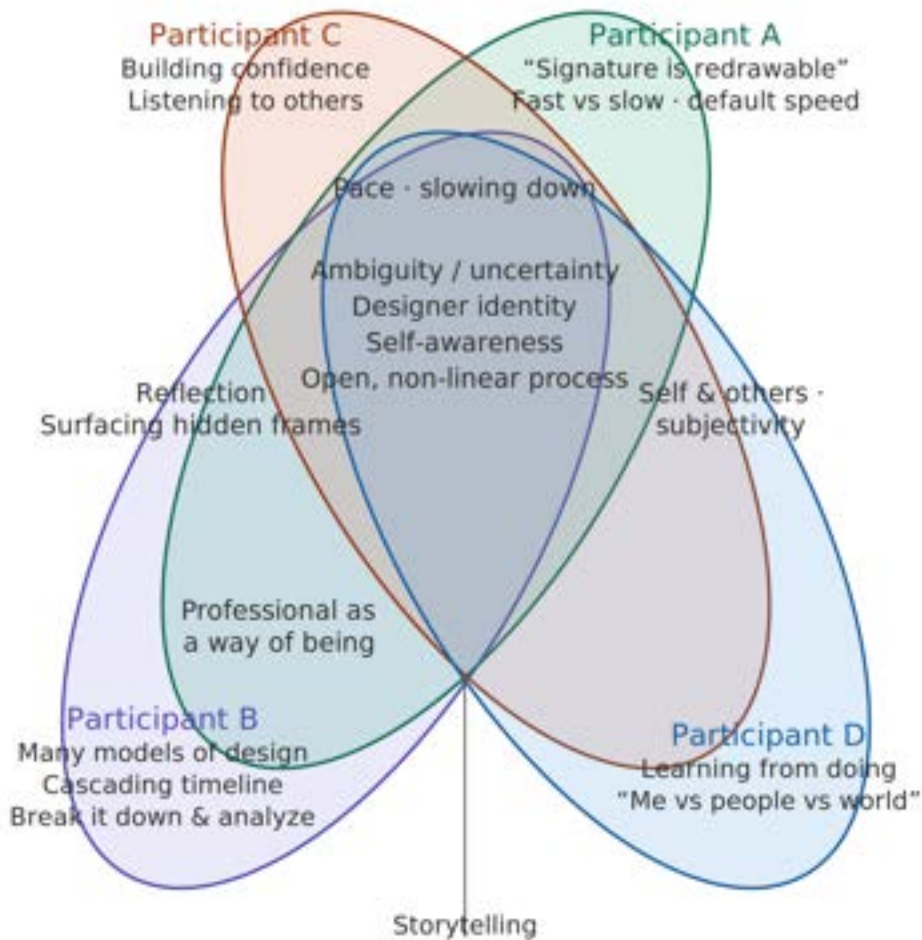
#	Participant A	Participant B	Participant C	Participant D
1	Inclusive	Everyone thinks there is a certain "way" to do things when it is much more undefined ★	Non-linear design process ★	What I feel is also what others feel ★
2	Default speed	Many models of design	Noticing my design habits	Uncertainty in design
3	Similarity	Ambiguity	Accepting uncertainties ★	Awareness of ourselves
4	Reflection as more than a pit stop ★	Psychology and how the way we think impacts our design ★	Reflection	Everyone sort of has a unique style or perspective
5	Ambiguity as a signal and not just a problem ★	There is a lot you can breakdown and analyze in a design process	Slowing down	Personal narrative and realisation of our own thinking
6	Frames everywhere ★	Design and personal identity overlap ★	Seeing design as ongoing	What we think/feel is subjective ★
7	Fast vs slow instincts	Becoming a professional/expert	Seeing hidden assumptions	Measuring our own way of thinking & doing is very interesting
8	Being a professional is a way of being	Storytelling	Listening to others	Learning from doing
9	My signature is redrawable	Cascading timeline	Building confidence	Our own identity as a designer
10	Relational vs slow designer	Reflection	Identity development ★	Me vs. people vs. world ★

Each participant's ten items in the order they wrote them. Starred items (their top three) are highlighted.

Theme	Participant A	Participant B	Participant C	Participant D
<b>Designer identity / self</b>	"My signature is redrawable"	"Design and personal identity overlap" ★	"Building confidence" "Identity development" ★	"Our own identity as a designer"
<b>Non-linear / undefined process</b>	—	"Everyone thinks there is a certain "way" to do things when it is much more undefined" ★ "Many models of design" "Cascading timeline"	"Non-linear design process" ★ "Seeing design as ongoing"	—
<b>Ambiguity / uncertainty</b>	"Ambiguity as a signal and not just a problem" ★	"Ambiguity"	"Accepting uncertainties" ★	"Uncertainty in design"
<b>Awareness of one's own thinking</b>	—	"Psychology and how the way we think impacts our design" ★	"Noticing my design habits"	"Awareness of ourselves" "Measuring our own way of thinking & doing is very interesting"
<b>Reflection</b>	"Reflection as more than a pit stop" ★	"Reflection"	"Reflection"	"Learning from doing"
<b>Framing / hidden assumptions</b>	"Frames everywhere" ★	"There is a lot you can breakdown and analyze in a design process"	"Seeing hidden assumptions"	—
<b>Self &amp; others / subjectivity</b>	"Inclusive" "Relational vs slow designer"	—	"Listening to others"	"What I feel is also what others feel" ★ "Everyone sort of has a unique style or perspective" "What we think/feel is subjective" ★ "Me vs. people vs. world" ★
<b>Pace / slowing down</b>	"Default speed"	—	"Slowing down"	—

Theme	Participant A	Participant B	Participant C	Participant D
	"Fast vs slow instincts"			
<b>Storytelling / narrative</b>	—	"Storytelling"	—	"Personal narrative and realisation of our own thinking"
<b>Becoming a professional</b>	"Being a professional is a way of being"	"Becoming a professional/expert"	—	—

The same words, sorted into ten themes. Note Participant D's three stars all fall in one row — "Self & others / subjectivity" (shaded) — while A, B and C spread their stars across three themes apiece.



Shared takeaways sit in the centre where all four sets meet; each participant's unique items sit in their own lobe.

A discussion emerged from Participant D's first starred item about whether an online community could be built around design-signature ideas, and about the contrast between polished portfolio culture and the tedious, less-shiny middle of the design process. Cindy noted the related history

of failure-glorification rhetoric in Silicon Valley and observed that the people who publicly celebrate serial failure are not evenly distributed across demographics — that the freedom to claim failure as a credential has been disproportionately available to white men.

Cindy then introduced the Week 10 final assignment, which consists of three pieces: a Book Contribution Memo (600–800 words, structured around insight, evidence, honest complication, and specific proposal), a Dear Design letter addressed to a future reader of the book, and a Dear Design letter addressed to the participant's future self as a designer. She characterized the Dear Design letters as creative work and the memo as the place to be directive. The framing for the letters was that they are genuine communicative acts that simultaneously serve as personal culminations and as potentially usable artifacts for the book itself.

## WEEK 10 Part 1: Detailed Summary with Takeaways

Week 10 was the final session of the Spring 2026 Design Research Group. The session was structured around four activities: checking the technical report for completeness, sharing book recommendations from the final homework, completing and discussing a survey of accumulated book insights, and closing with personal reflections through the Dear Design letters to self.

**Technical report review.** The session opened with a review of the technical report living document. Cindy and René walked through the report and discussed the work that needs to be done before it will be published.

**Book recommendation presentations.** Each Participant gave a brief two-minute summary of their Book Contribution Memo. Participant A argued that the book's actual job is not explaining good design but helping readers see and redraw their own design signatures, and proposed a hybrid narrative-workbook structure with identity and ambiguity woven through every activity rather than confined to standalone chapters. Participant C recommended a workbook format in which each section introduces one idea briefly and then gives readers a small applied activity, including open space for sketches, timelines, and postcards. Participant D emphasized that the book should help readers become better versions of themselves, grounding this in narrative theory and identity theory, and added a distinctive proposal: that the book encourage readers to share reflections with others, drawing on the community experience of the DRG itself.

Participant B focused on the identity-personal identity overlap, recommending exercises that ask readers to notice where these converge or diverge, and proposed a structured narrative reframing practice in which readers write down events from a design process and then rearrange them into a growth or redemptive story.

**Dear Design letters to the reader.** Each Participant then shared highlights from their letter addressed to a future reader. Participant B foregrounded design as a way of looking at the world and moving through life, positioning the book as a personal reflection process as much as an academic one. Participant D narrated the shift from wanting a clean process to asking why the work feels hard, and from there to asking what the way one designs says about who one is.

Participant C emphasized noticing the quiet background of the process, including pauses and direction changes, small choices that reveal assumptions and values. Participant A described imagining a reader who already does design in some way but still feels like everyone else has a cleaner or more legitimate process, and framed the book as offering language and tools to see and redraw one's own signature rather than a perfect process diagram.

Cindy observed that the recommendations the Participants were making for the book were, at a deeper level, about a process for becoming who one wants to be as a person, not merely improving a workflow.

**Survey of cumulative book insights.** René had compiled a 15-item survey from the book insights generated each week by Claude during the summary process. Participants completed the survey during the session, indicating whether they agreed or disagreed with each recommendation. The group discussed the results briefly. Strong agreement (all four Participants choosing Strongly Agree or Agree) appeared for: non-linear process shown as normal, open space for multiple response formats, and including real design signatures from multiple designers. Moderate but not universal agreement appeared for threading identity content throughout, the inner critic as a topic, and the book stating its purpose explicitly upfront. The design justice per-exercise prompt received the most split response, with one Disagree, suggesting that Participants valued justice content in the book but did not unanimously support embedding it in every individual activity.

**Book cover and title activity.** Participants created book covers and proposed titles. Cindy introduced a constraint during the session: the final title must begin with "Dear Design:" to build on the frame already established in the project. Participants riffed on their titles accordingly. Participant D chose "Made by Making Yourself" for her cover concept, depicting an unfinished self-portrait sketch that conveys ongoing identity formation. Participant C created flowing wave forms and Mobius strip elements titled "Design in Motion," emphasizing reflection and multiple paths. Participant B's cover featured overlapping multicolored geometric shapes that came to resemble gems, with the title "The Grounded Designer." Participant A's cover traced the evolution from a fast, linear, performance-driven design signature to a flowing blue wave annotated with hearts, heads, and question marks, with faint traces of the earlier signature retained to show the journey.

### **Participant A**

- Your Design Signature: A Non-Linear Journey of Curiosity, Empathy, and Impact
- On the Track and In the Waves: Seeing Who You Are When You Design
- Frames, Loops, and Bench Moments: A Workbook for Becoming The Designer You Are
- Dear Design: Your Design Signature
- Dear Design: A Non-Linear Journey of Curiosity, Empathy, and Impact
- Dear Design: From Fast Tracks to Reflective Waves
- Dear Design: Loops, Bench Moments, and the Designer You're Becoming

### **Participant B**

- Growing as a Designer: Developing Confidence in Your Personal Design Identity
- How Do You Design?
- The Whole Designer: How to Develop Passion Through Your Design Process
- Breaking the Barrier Between Professional Thinking and Personal Passion
- Design with Intention
- The Grounded Designer: Everyone Can Build Confidence in Their Unique Design Voice
- Dear Design: The Grounded Designer
- More Than a Career: How to Develop Passion as a Designer

### Participant C

- Design is Not a Straight Line
- Inside a Design Process
- Design in Motion: Tracing the Path of Your Design Process
- Design in Motion: A Reflection Guide for Designers in Progress

### Participant D

- Where is design going
- Never the same process
- Made by making yourself
- Dear Design: Are You Still Becoming?

### Participant A



Participant A's cover depicted a blue wave annotated with small icons: hearts, heads, and question marks. The wave traced the evolution from Participant A's earlier design signature, which was fast, linear, and performance-driven, toward a more reflective, flowing one. Faint

traces of the earlier signature were intentionally retained to show where the journey began. Cindy noted that the cover's ending arc seemed to flow directly into Participant C's design, which also concluded in a swoop, giving the group's work a visual continuity.

### **Participant B**



Participant B's cover featured overlapping geometric shapes in multiple colors, each representing a different facet of a designer's identity. After completing it, she noted that the shapes had come to resemble gems, reinforcing the sense of groundedness and security she associated with her preferred title. She described the design as representing how different aspects of who you are as a designer fit together.

### **Participant C**



Participant C's cover showed flowing wave forms and elements suggesting a Mobius strip, with the title "Design in Motion." The visual was intended to convey that design has reflection built into it, with multiple paths and the possibility of looking back. Cindy described it as beautiful, noting that the swoop at the end gave a sense of ongoing movement rather than closure.

## Participant D



Participant D's cover featured a pencil sketch of a face, partially rendered, with the phrase "Made by Making Yourself" written below. The unfinished quality was intentional, conveying the ongoing nature of identity formation. Participant D explained that the concept reflected both the act of making things and the process of becoming oneself through that making.

## Message to Book Publisher

As a final activity, each participant contributed two to three sentences addressed to a potential publisher, arguing for why the book should be published.

### Participant A

"This book matters because most design education still focuses on methods and outputs, while leaving the designer's lived process and identity out in the shadows. Dear Design makes those invisible signatures visible, giving readers simple, visual tools to see how they truly work. By combining grounded theory with postcards, timelines, and reflection prompts, the book enables readers to change not only what they design, but who they are becoming as designers."

## Participant B

"This book is important because it develops resilient designers. It takes care of people's mental processes as they design and problem-solve in their life and facilitates a personal exploration that is lacking in design education."

## Participant C

"This book is important because many people only see the final outcomes of design but ignore the process behind it. This book can help readers understand that uncertainty, confusion, and revising are just parts of a design process and it's really normal for designers, not something wrong and fully negative. This book also provides people a way to reflect on their design habits, values, and identities."

## Participant D

"The book matters because it reminds people why they love design and what they can find through this process full of uncertainty. Right now, everyone is stressed about AI taking over, and this book can be the place for people to stop to ask why that still matters and why the human behind the work still matters most."

**Dear Design letters to self.** The final and most personal activity was each Participant reading their letter to their future self. Participant A read aloud, naming discomfort about how fast they move, how reflection had been treated as a pit stop, and the desire to keep asking: Who am I being in this project? What kind of ambiguity is this? Participant C's letter reminded their future self that learning happens in the middle, that uncertainty is a signal to look at a problem differently rather than a reason to accelerate, and that the story you tell yourself about your process matters. Participant D's letter named frustration, career uncertainty, and the shift from believing good design meant mastering the right skills to understanding that the work was always about building a person. The letter closed with hope not for recognition or an impressive title but for becoming the person one actually is, guided by one's own voice and eye. Participant B read last, acknowledging that the design process still feels abstract and hard to grasp, tracing this to a strong drive toward efficiency, and connecting it to the long-maintained boundary between design identity and personal identity. The letter described the seminar as a first step toward slowing down and integrating those two sides.

**Closing reflection from Cindy.** Cindy closed the session with two extended reflections. The first was the David Foster Wallace fish-and-water parable: two young fish swimming through water encounter an older fish who says "morning, how's the water?" and after the older fish passes, one young fish turns to the other and asks "what the hell is water?" (2009) Cindy connected this to the DRG's purpose of helping designers notice the context they are already inside rather than moving through it on automatic. The second was a personal story from Chiang Mai, Thailand, in 1989, in which a monk gave her a small luck Buddha on a shoelace. While riding the tailgate of a pickup truck on a dirt road toward the Golden Triangle, she heard the shoelace snap and accepted the loss with equanimity. When the truck arrived, the Buddha

was resting between her shoes on the tailgate. Years later, a colleague told her the reason it came back was because she had been willing to let it go. Cindy noted that this has taken her more than two decades to genuinely absorb as a principle for her own life. She closed by reading from Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet* (1929): have patience with everything that remains unsolved in your heart; try to love the questions themselves; do not now look for the answers, because you could not live them. Her stated hope for the book is that it invites readers to love the questions.

## Takeaways for the book and DRG:

**The personal and the professional are not separate for these designers.** Across all four letters to self and the book memo presentations, no Participant treated their design process as a purely technical question. Each located the difficulty of seeing their own process clearly in something personal: a drive toward efficiency, a boundary between design and personal identity, frustration with career pace, a habit of narrating oneself as unsure. The book's most compelling move, as reflected in this session, may be naming that entanglement explicitly rather than treating the design process as a neutral technical topic.

**The closing activities produced the most substantive content.** The book recommendations were articulate, but the Dear Design letters to self generated material that is more emotionally resonant, more specific, and arguably more persuasive as evidence of what the seminar actually accomplished. Cindy's closing reflection, including the Buddha story and the Rilke passage, articulates the book's animating question more clearly than any abstract description. Both belong in the technical report as documentation of the DRG's highest-quality output, and the Buddha story in particular has potential as introductory or framing material for the book itself.

**The survey reveals genuine range, not just affirmation.** The split on the design justice per-exercise item and the Neutral responses on several identity and inner-critic items indicate that Participants have real opinions about what the book should do, not just reflexive agreement. This is useful data: the recommendations with unanimous strong agreement (non-linear process as normal, multiple response formats, showing real design signatures) are the most confidently actionable for Cindy.

## Connections to the Book

This section outlines connections to the book from the later half of the seminar, weeks 4 through 10.

### Week 4

Week 4 produced the clearest argument for the book's structure that has surfaced in the seminar so far. Three threads converge on it.

First, the homology claim. All four students independently arrived at the same conceptual move: reflection is not appended to design, it is the same operation running on a different timescale. Both are iterative. Both move between problem-setting and problem-solving. Both turn tacit material into visible material. Cindy did not frame reflection this way in the slides — she used Schön's reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action as the conceptual anchors from the Book, "The Reflective Practitioner" (1983). The students went further on their own. That convergence matters because it gives the book a real argument to stand on: reflection prompts inside design exercises are not pedagogical add-ons. They are continuations of the same work. If the book makes that claim explicit, every reflection prompt earns its place by argument rather than by convention.

Second, the format recommendation. Three of the four students, working independently on a book they are not writing, recommended the same structural solution: reflection threaded through the book as recurring prompts or exercises rather than collected into a single dedicated chapter. Participant A's concept map made this explicit, with "reproducible activities & prompts in the book" annotated and underlined as the organizing claim. Participant D's concept map labeled the transitions between concepts as "Practices," already imagining the structured exercises a reader would move through. Participant B proposed reflection at the start and end of the book mirroring the pre/post survey structure they had just experienced, with embedded short reflection tasks inside. The convergence is striking enough to take seriously as a design recommendation: the book wants to be a workbook, or close to it.

Third, the value proposition. Participant A's additional thoughts contained the clearest one-line articulation of what the book offers that the seminar has produced: the reflection activities the synthesis table introduced were already familiar to her in form, but "it was as simple as asking, 'What did this show you about how you design,' and suddenly it all connected back to our postcards and signatures." The thing the book offers is not a new collection of reflection activities — that work has been done many times. It offers a single additional question that converts existing reflection activities into design-signature work. That is a small, defensible, distinctive claim, and it is large enough to organize the book around.

A note on what the four concept maps add to the picture. Given the same content list and asked to organize it, the four students produced four genuinely different organizing logics: a left-to-right flow (Participant D), a book-centered orbital (Participant A), a process-centered radial (Participant B), and an identity-centered radial (Participant C). That variance is itself a finding for the book. The Weeks 1–3 content does not have a single correct structure, and the book probably needs to support more than one path through the same material — a reader oriented toward process, a reader oriented toward identity, a reader oriented toward the book itself as a structured practice. The maps suggest the book's job is less to impose an order than to make multiple orders legible.

One transition worth flagging. The seminar has spent four weeks inside an explicitly individual frame. Week 5 is social justice and equity, and is now Participant C's to run. The book argument that emerges from Weeks 1–4 — reflection as structurally homologous to design, prompts threaded through, design-signature framing as the connective tissue — is currently a story

about an individual designer reflecting on individual practice. Whether the book can extend that argument to a social and equity-aware frame, or whether it needs a separate argument for that material, is the open question Week 5 will start to answer. Participant C's identity-centered concept map suggests she may already have a way in.

## Week 5

Week 5 sharpens an open question Week 4 had left implicit: whether the book's argument extends to a social and equity-aware frame, or whether that material needs a separate scaffolding. Three threads from the week's work converge on a partial answer.

First, the absorption-versus-discovery distinction matters for how the book should treat this content. Week 4's homology claim — reflection and design as the same operation — was something the four students arrived at past where Cindy's slides went. Week 5's "design is not neutral" insight is exactly where Costanza-Chock's argument intends to land, and the four students absorbed it rather than discovered it. That is not a problem; it is what reading a strong argument is supposed to do. But it means the book cannot lean on student convergence as evidence the way it can with the Week 4 material. What the book *can* lean on is the consistency with which the four students proposed the same placement: integrated throughout, embedded in the design awareness questions, asked in the form of specific questions about power and who is centered. That convergence reinforces the workbook-or-prompt-embedded format the cohort has now proposed in two consecutive weeks. The Week 5 contribution to the book's structural argument is not a new format recommendation but an additional class of question: power-and-who-is-centered, alongside the design-process and metacognition questions the seminar has been generating since Week 3.

Second, Participant A's "my process has politics too" line is doing the same kind of work for Week 5 that her synthesis-table observation did for Week 4 — condensing what the topic does to a designer's frame in a single sentence the book could use. The line takes the design signature concept the seminar has been building and extends it directly into a power-aware frame: signatures are patterns, patterns can be redesigned, and patterns can be redesigned around values that include who one's work centers and who it leaves out. That extension is exactly what the book needs to claim if it is going to carry its individual-frame argument into a social-frame chapter without dropping the connective tissue. Participant A's in-class reflection sheet — the globe captioned "think about the whole community," with the take-home line "we should treat signatures not just as personal style, but more as patterns we can intentionally design to embed more community-centered values" — operationalizes the homology claim from Week 4 in the new register. If the book wants to extend the design-signatures framework to social justice without inventing new vocabulary, Participant A has shown how.

Third, the variance in the personal reflections is itself a content asset for the book. Participant D's two-audience framing — that the social-justice content does different work for readers in marginalized groups (giving language to something already felt) than for readers in privileged groups (revealing what they have never had to notice) — is the cleanest articulation in the four

submissions of why the book's social-justice content cannot do one thing for one reader. The four reflections themselves are an early prototype of that variance: Participant A reframed her entire approach, Participant D recognized her own past defaults, Participant C named procedural changes she will make, and Participant B engaged at intellectual distance and named that distance as a privilege. Designing content that respects all four of those stances without flattening any of them is a real challenge — and the book may need to anticipate it explicitly rather than write toward a single imagined reader.

A note worth carrying forward. The audience brainstorm produced a fairly conventional list — design students through general personal-development readers — that skews toward design-adjacent professionals and away from community-led design or marginalized-user audiences. That is a tension worth holding given the day's other content, in which the cohort spent forty minutes on Costanza-Chock's argument that design justice asks who is centered and who is not (Costanza-Chock, 2020). The book may want to revisit that audience list with the Costanza-Chock frame applied — not to discard the list, but to ask which audiences the book is positioned to serve and which it is currently positioned to leave out.

## Week 6

Week 6 surfaces four contributions worth carrying into the book's structure, and each one builds on or sharpens a finding from earlier weeks rather than starting fresh.

First, the cohort produced a consistent and now-cumulative argument for how the book's conceptual content should sit. All four students argued, in their take-home writing, that the theories content belongs woven through the book rather than confined to a single chapter, and three explicitly named the format: questions or activities embedded in the postcards and exercises. This is now the third consecutive week of converging on the same structural recommendation. Week 4 produced it about reflection, Week 5 produced it about social justice and equity, and Week 6 produced it about theories. Three different conceptual topics have triggered the same format intuition from four different students. That is enough evidence to treat the workbook-or-prompt-embedded format as a finding from the DRG, not a hypothesis the book is still testing. The question for the next phase of the book is not whether the format should be embedded but how the postcards and exercises need to be designed to carry that much work.

Second, the cohort reframed theory from "academic content to be learned" into "a vocabulary for naming what is already happening in design." This is the same shape of finding the Week 4 cohort produced about reflection: the students arrived past where the assigned readings went. Lakoff's "Don't Think of an Elephant!" (2004) and Kahneman's "Thinking Fast and Slow" (2011) were introduced as readings about cognition and framing; the four students returned with readings of their own cognition and framing. Participant D recognized her own System 1 reactions in design reviews and identified her habit of jumping to a solution before fully reading the problem; she described it through the elephant-and-rider metaphor, with the elephant of instinct already walking in one direction while the rider of conscious reasoning held on. Participant C reread her reference-checking habit as a System 2 move rather than a confidence

problem. Participant B identified the negative self-stories she has been telling herself about her design skills and proposed redemptive storytelling as a reframe. Participant A produced one of the strongest lines the cohort has written so far: "I am both the character and the narrator of my design life." If the book wants to argue that the design signature concept gives readers language for something they have already been doing, the Week 6 homework is the cleanest evidence yet that the move works on real readers. The content does not teach theory; it gives readers names for moves they have already been making.

Third, the audience spread the four students named is itself useful evidence about how the book should signal which theory does what work for which reader. Participant D pointed to non-designers crossing into design (engineers, product managers, researchers) for whom theories from other fields would feel familiar and ground the design content in recognizable terms. Participants A and C pointed to early-career designers and students who are unsure whether their process is "right" and for whom theory functions as permission to have an idiosyncratic process. Participant B pointed to mid-career designers dissatisfied with current practice and for whom theory functions as a tool for reframing. These are three distinct uses of the same theory content, and the four students named them without prompting. If the book wants the theory content to do its work across these reader stances, the embedding format gives it room: a prompt for the cross-over reader can ask one question, a prompt for the early-career reader can ask another, and a prompt for the dissatisfied mid-career reader can ask a third. The theory content is not one thing the reader needs to learn; it is a set of vocabularies that does different things depending on what the reader brings to the page. The book's job is to make that explicit rather than to leave the reader to discover the right reading on their own.

Fourth, prompted by the in-class reflection sheets and the cognitive-surrender thread from the AI brainstorm: all four students integrated the theories material with the AI brainstorm rather than treating them as separate session segments. Participant A's sketch reads "AI x Design"; Participant C's tree diagram asks whether AI treats different groups the same and whether AI reflects designer values; Participant D drew System 2 as a figure with antennae touching AI and System 1 as an elephant; Participant B's System 1 and System 2 shapes sit on the same page as the framing material. The cohort is treating cognition theory and AI as one problem space rather than as adjacent topics. If the book is going to address AI at all, the Week 6 reflection sheets are evidence that the theory chapters or threads need to do the AI work in the same place. Separating them would be reading the cohort against itself. The cognitive-surrender thread points the same direction: design signatures as a forcing function against unreflective AI use is a book-relevant claim that lives at the intersection of theory and AI, not in either alone.

## Week 7

Week 7 produced four contributions worth carrying into the book's structure, and three of them shifted the book's pending design decisions in a substantive way.

First, the CELT books activity finally gave the format question concrete instantiation. For three weeks the cohort had been arguing for an embedded-postcard or workbook format without proposing what that would actually look like. Week 7 produced more specific format ideas in ninety minutes than the rest of the DRG combined. Participant A proposed design signature postcards with stamp-style miniatures on the top right and a postcards-across-chapters structure that accumulates into an end-of-book reflection set. Participant B proposed a double-notepad structure (one for drawing and writing, one for reading), envelope-letter inserts, flip-open sections with example postcards, and open writing space with comic-like imagery. Participant C proposed an interactive book with sketching and writing space, small activities throughout, and postcards or fold-out sections. Participant D proposed a coloring book of grid shapes for recording design signatures, a cut-out last page that reveals highlighted central ideas, and a travel-book format with an illustrative map of the design journey. These are not abstract format claims; they are designs Cindy and a publisher could prototype. The book's next phase of structural work has the material to pick from.

Second, the cohort's placement recommendation for narrative psychology produced real variance for the first time, and the variance is informative. Weeks 4, 5, and 6 all produced near-universal thread-throughout-embedded-in-postcards claims. Week 7 produced four distinct placement strategies: Participant A wants narrative woven across multiple postcards as a cluster of tools; Participant B wants it as a chapter near the end of the book for designers reinterpreting a finished process upward toward portfolio presentation; Participant C wants it as small reflection prompts after each activity; Participant D wants it bridging the design awareness and storytelling sections. The variance is partly explained by what narrative psychology actually is: it is not a lens for analyzing design (like cognitive frames) or a value for designing (like social justice), but an intervention you perform on your own design story. Different parts of the book need that intervention in different ways. The thread-throughout default is no longer the only option, and the book may need to do multiple things with the same conceptual material depending on where the reader is in the book.

Third, all four students independently named the same central move: telling a different story about your design process is itself a design move, not just an interpretive one. Participant B framed it as an obligation rather than an option ("not just something I can do but something I should do, because it can actually make my life better"). Participant D framed it as agency ("I can better shape my own life narrative... I know I can work toward it"). Participant C, previously the most reserved of the four about claiming her own reframes, wrote one of her firmest lines yet: "A hard process does not mean I failed or that I am not capable." Participant A wrote that she has "more authorship over my design story than I was claiming before." This mimesis-as-design-agency framing distinguishes narrative psychology from the other book topics. Reflection lets a designer notice what they did. Social justice lets a designer ask who they centered. Theories let a designer name what frame they used. Narrative psychology lets a designer change what their design process means by retelling it. That is a categorically different move, and the book should treat narrative as an interventional tool rather than another analytical lens.

Fourth, Participants C and A introduced a caution against the redemption-arc default that the book should preserve. Participant C wrote, "I do not think every difficult moment has to become a positive story. Sometimes the more useful thing is just noticing what kind of story I keep telling myself, and whether that story is helping me or limiting me." Participant A added, "I don't want to force a fake positive narrative on hard experiences." This is the cohort's first pushback on a topic's optimism, and it produces a real design constraint for the book: the narrative chapter or thread must offer the agency of re-storying without prescribing the redemption arc as the right story. The book has to give readers the tool without conscripting them into the redemption template the Hidden Brain episode was built around.

## Week 8

Week 8 produced four contributions worth carrying into the book's structural decisions.

First, the two-layer storytelling structure the cohort converged on during the debrief is directly usable as a book-facing format. The pairing of a logical process and timeline layer with a narrative layer (thoughts, feelings, turning points, aha moments) maps cleanly onto two postcard versions, two-column reflection prompts, or a single postcard with a "describe what happened" prompt paired with a "tell me the story" prompt. The book does not need to invent the mechanism; the cohort already proposed it. This is the most concretely operationalized format suggestion the DRG has produced so far.

Second, Participant C's counter-voice should be lifted nearly verbatim into the storytelling chapter or thread. The sentence "I don't think every difficult moment has to become a positive story, because sometimes the more useful thing is just noticing what kind of story I keep telling myself, and whether that story is helping me or not" is the cohort's clearest articulation of a stance the book needs to validate. Without it, the book risks producing storytelling content that reads as relentless redemption-arc framing, which will lose thoughtful readers. With it, the book's storytelling content acquires intellectual range: it can hold both the growth-narrative work and the diagnostic noticing work as legitimate moves.

Third, the Adams et al. discussion gives the book a ready vocabulary for the identity content that will come in Week 9. Knowing, acting, and being as a triad; embodied practice; multiple trajectories; professional way of being; and the six design categories all came up unprompted in the debrief and were applied by participants to their own work. The book's identity content can borrow this vocabulary with reasonable confidence that it will land. Participant A's specific framing of "who are you being as a designer?" alongside prompts about default design modes is a particularly clean translation from theory into a book-facing prompt.

Fourth, Participant A's meta-feedback about the report structure is worth taking seriously beyond the report itself. Her observation that the overview-and-recap split breaks reader continuity points at a structural decision the book will face. Whatever conceptual chapters the book has, the reader will arrive without remembering what came before. Combining context with recap per chapter, rather than separating them, is the kind of editorial decision that protects the reader's experience. This is also a small piece of evidence that the workbook or guide format

the cohort has been pushing toward needs structural choices made at the chapter level, not just at the postcard level.

A smaller observation: the peer review activity revealed structural inconsistency across the four participants' tech report entries that has to be cleaned up before the report is presented externally. Participants C and D need restructuring (all four postcards in sequence, with one consolidated "what I learned about myself" block at the end). This is mechanical rather than analytical, but it has to happen before the report can be shared with readers outside the DRG.

## Week 9

The most directly portable material from Week 9 is the instrumental-to-existential ambiguity vocabulary itself. The Capella, Trinkaus, Beach, Fox research provides a reader-facing concept the book can use without reproducing the methodology. Readers can be asked what flavor of ambiguity they are working in without ever needing to hear about MSTAT-II or the underlying studies. The book gets to take the lens and leave the apparatus behind.

The cohort's four-way disagreement about where ambiguity belongs is itself a usable finding. Participant C wanted a discrete short chapter or activity. Participant B wanted no explicit chapter, with the idea absorbed through doing. Participant A wanted small embedded prompts woven throughout. Participant D wanted ambiguity paired explicitly with the identity topic. That four engaged readers arrived at four different structural answers is information about the concept: ambiguity may resist being chapterized because it really does sit underneath everything. The book can use that observation to motivate whatever structural choice it ends up making, and can do so honestly rather than presenting the choice as inevitable.

The convergent and divergent timelines from the engineering and playground designers, which Cindy showed during the field trip, are a concrete artifact the book may want to use directly. They visualize the design signatures claimed in a single image: distinct paths through ambiguity, comparable-quality outcomes. If the book needs a place where the central thesis becomes empirically visible rather than just argued, that figure does the work. It also creates a natural seam for connecting the ambiguity material to the design-signatures core content rather than treating them as separate topics.

Cindy's observation about agentic language gives the book a concrete behavioral target. Rather than asking readers to "reflect more," the book can describe what reflection sounds like when it has done its work: language in which the reader names herself as an actor in her own process rather than a passive recipient of method. That is observable, replicable, and writeable into prompts. It also gives the technical report a measurable form of evidence that the DRG produced the kind of change the book aims to produce.

On identity development placement, the cohort did not converge but the shape of the disagreement is itself a recommendation. Participants A and B leaned toward end-of-book placement; Participant C treated identity as the destination the design process is moving toward; Participant D framed becoming a professional as decision-making rather than skill

accumulation, which reads more as a frame than a location. A reasonable structural reading: identity is not a chapter, it is the implicit endpoint that the rest of the book is moving toward, and it gets its explicit moment near the end. The Dear Design letter to a future self, which participants are writing for Week 10, is essentially that move in miniature.

Participant D's portfolio-of-process idea, named almost in passing during the full-quarter review, may be the most book-portable proposition of the session. The cultural backdrop of polished portfolios that hide the tedious middle is a real obstacle to the book's argument that design signatures live in process rather than output. If the book wants a contemporary cultural foil, that is the one. A single sidebar or framing paragraph that names this would give the book a recognizable point of contact for younger readers.

Finally, the Week 10 Dear Design letters will produce text that may be directly usable in the book itself. The Week 10 instructions framed these as potential reader testimonials, foreword material, or opening matter. That framing is worth taking seriously when reviewing what comes back. Some letters will read as cohort artifacts. Some may genuinely be book material.

## Week 10

Week 10 did not introduce new readings. Its function was synthesis, not input, and the connections to the DRG's accumulated bibliography therefore run in the opposite direction from prior weeks: rather than applying a text to a question, participants were applying everything they had absorbed over ten weeks to a single integrated output. What emerges when you look at that output against the readings is that several of the quarter's most important concepts surfaced in the final session not as cited ideas but as lived ones, which is itself a meaningful result.

**Bruner (1987) and narrative identity.** Bruner's argument that humans construct selfhood through the stories they tell about their own lives was introduced in Week 7 as a theoretical frame. In Week 10, it appeared without attribution in the letters Participants wrote to themselves. Participant D's letter is the clearest example: the explicit reframing of a childhood expectation ("I thought I would grow up and become someone great, successful, and certain") against the reality of who they have actually become, and the deliberate choice to name that gap as grounds for self-acceptance rather than failure, is narrative identity work in practice. Participant A's letter does the same thing more structurally, naming a prior design signature (fast, linear, performance-driven) and consciously narrating the arc away from it. Participant B's book recommendation also directly proposed that the book build in exercises for readers to rewrite design events as redemptive or growth stories, which is a direct application of Bruner's framework as a pedagogical tool. The session provides evidence that narrative psychology did not just land as an interesting theory but produced a shift in how at least some Participants were actually narrating their own experience.

**Adams, Daly, Mann, and Dall'Alba (2011) and professional identity.** The Adams et al. reading on professional identity development, introduced in Week 9, argued that becoming a professional involves an embodied practice, an integration of professional and personal ways of being that goes well beyond technical skill acquisition. Participant B named this integration

explicitly as the thing that had been most difficult and most changed: the long-maintained boundary between design identity and personal identity, and the seminar's role in beginning to dissolve it. Participant D's letter traced a similar arc, describing the realization that every design project was not just building a portfolio but building a person. The session as a whole functions as a demonstration of the Adams et al. claim that identity development is slow, iterative, and happens through repeated engagement rather than through single conceptual encounters, since Participants arrived at these formulations only at the end of ten weeks of sustained work.

**Schon (1983) and reflection-in-action.** Schon's distinction between reflection-on-action (looking back after the fact) and reflection-in-action (reflecting while still inside the process) has been a structuring concept throughout the DRG. Week 10 produced a specific, interesting extension of that distinction. Several Participants, in both their memos and their letters, named the difficulty of pausing mid-process as precisely what the book needs to address. Participant C's letter reminded their future self not to panic or accelerate when the next step is unclear but to pause and look at the problem differently, which is a behavioral description of reflection-in-action as a practice to be cultivated. Participant C's book memo also proposed that the workbook include prompts for readers to mark where they paused or changed direction, which is an attempt to make Schon's concept usable by a solo reader without an instructor or seminar community. The survey result showing strong support for embedded reflection prompts throughout rather than in a single chapter aligns with Schon's premise that reflection needs to be integrated into process rather than appended to it.

**Kahneman (2011) and fast/slow thinking.** Kahneman's System 1 and System 2 framework, introduced in Week 6 as a theoretical lens, appeared in Week 10 primarily through Participant A's contributions. Their book memo referenced "frames, fast/slow thinking" as part of what the book needs to make visible, and their letter described the default toward speed as something that had to be named and examined before it could be changed. The survey also showed strong support for the recommendation that theories like fast/slow thinking appear throughout the book as tools for understanding one's own design habits rather than as a standalone academic chapter, which reflects a deepened understanding of how Kahneman's framework is most useful: not as content to be learned but as a diagnostic lens to be internalized.

**Costanza-Chock (2020) and design justice.** The design justice reading introduced in Week 5 was the one area where Week 10 showed genuine divergence within the cohort. The survey item asking whether each exercise in the book should include a prompt about who is centered and who is left out received the most split response of any item, including one Disagree. Participant C was the Participant who most consistently integrated design justice thinking throughout the quarter, and their book memo and letter both returned to questions of inclusion, power, and whose values shape the outcome. The divergence in survey responses suggests that participants arrived at different conclusions about whether justice content belongs woven into every activity or concentrated in designated sections, which is itself a design decision the book will need to make explicitly. Costanza-Chock's framing of design justice as a structural orientation rather than a topic argues for the former; the survey result suggests that not all readers of this book will arrive already receptive to that argument, which is a useful finding for how the book introduces the concept.

**Rilke and the Tao Te Ching as closing texts.** Cindy closed the session with a passage from Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet* (1929), and her decision to reach outside the DRG's academic bibliography at the final moment is worth noting for the book. The Rilke passage, on having patience with unsolved questions and learning to love the questions themselves, names the book's animating stance more precisely and more effectively than any of the theoretical readings do. The Tao Te Ching (1988), which appeared on the quote card Cindy distributed at the close of the session, operates similarly. Both texts belong to a different register than the academic sources: they address the reader directly as a person with a life to live rather than as a learner acquiring a framework. The book may need material in this register, not as decoration but as the framing language that gives the academic content its meaning. The fact that Cindy reached for these texts at the moment of closing, when the work was done and what remained was simply to leave the Participants with something to carry, suggests that she already knows this.

**Implications for the book's reading list.** Week 10 also surfaced one new potential addition to the book's resource landscape: Rainer Maria Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet* (1929), which Cindy recommended explicitly to the cohort as a text she would have given her younger self. The book Cindy recommended to the group as a model for the kind of letter-writing the DRG had been practicing was implicitly present in the structure of the Dear Design letter format throughout the quarter. Whether Rilke belongs in a bibliography, an epigraph, or simply in Cindy's authorial voice as an influence is a question for the manuscript stage, but it was named publicly enough in Week 10 that it belongs in this record.