

1.Birth: In the beginning, there were grades

"You are born to become a doctor, a lawyer, or an engineer."

Those words didn't come from my family - who valued community, service, and diverse pathways - but they echoed throughout the culture I grew up in. They were the background noise of the schooling system; the unspoken social contract of what success was supposed to look like.

In pre-school, life was liberatory - full of play, curiosity, and joy. I was the "Curious Cat" in my family, always asking questions, fascinated by how things worked. But when I entered main school, curiosity gave way to individualistic competition. Achievement and intelligence was measured in numbers. Your worth was your test scores. The "highfliers" were those with the top averages, celebrated as the school's pride. I became determined to join them, spending hours memorising page after page from my textbooks.

We were all working towards the same end goal: the two major national exams — the Ordinary Level Examinations (O-Levels) and the Advanced Level Examinations (A-Levels). These were the milestones the entire schooling structure was built around. As Howlett (2021) notes, the culture glorified these exams as the "rite of passage" to success.

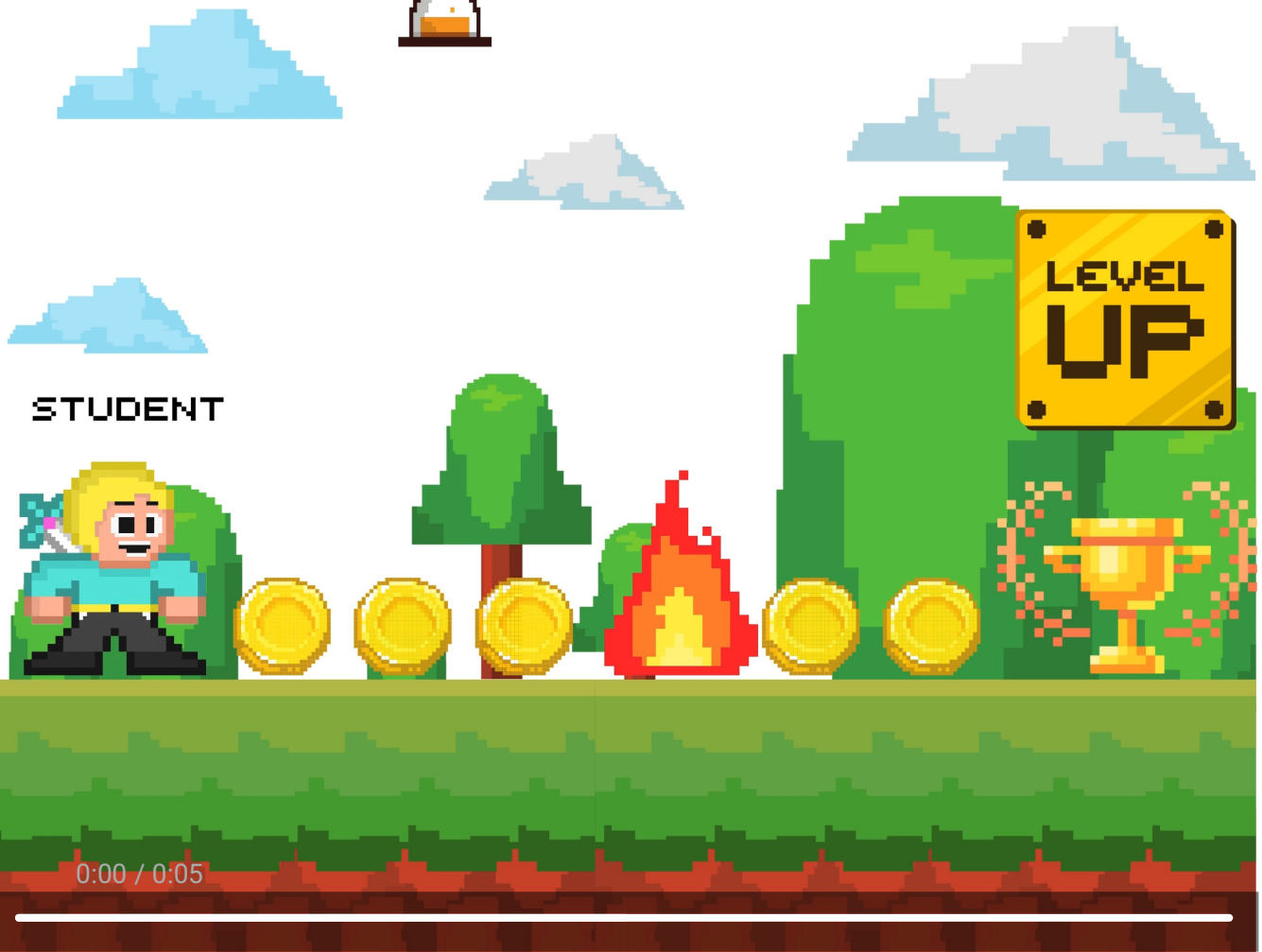
This constant drive towards the next exam felt like a never-ending race - predictable, repetitive, and highly competitive.

TEACHER: RUN STRAIGHT ALONG THIS SET PATH.
COLLECT THE MARKS. AVOID THE EXAM FIRE.
GO FAST TO GET RANKED #1 AND LEVEL UP TO
THE NEXT GRADE!

TIME: 3 SECONDS



MOTIVATION LEVEL:



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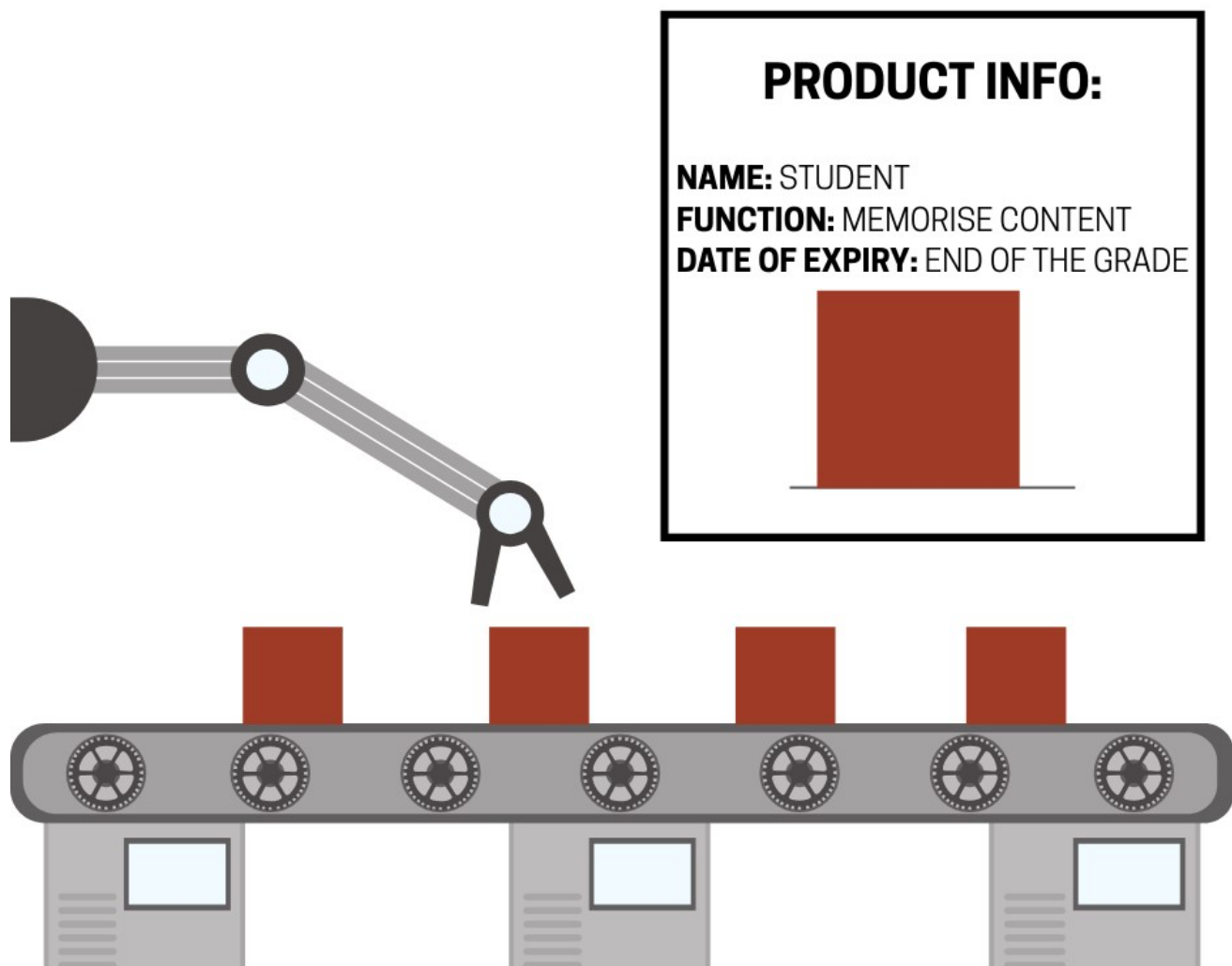
In this race-like structure, every student was expected to progress in the same way, chasing the same markers of success. But in reality, this was Freire's (2000) *banking model* in action. We were treated as depositories of knowledge: our role was to memorise and repeat what was deposited into us.

And while the system claimed to offer equal opportunity - every student across the island sitting the same exams - the reality was that students came from vastly different economic, social, and cultural backgrounds. As Howlett, Z. M. (2021) explains, those with greater capital had an enormous advantage, making the playing field anything but level.

Performance, not authenticity, was valued. My school, like many others, showcased its “quality” through the percentage of high grades achieved - a single quantitative measure that ignores the wide range of skills, creativity, and resilience students possess.

This narrow, standardised approach reminded me of the way products are made in a factory - uniform, efficient, and designed for a single purpose. It was the logic of the factory model ([Robinson, 2010](#)): schools as production lines, shaping students to fit narrow roles for the economy, a legacy of the Industrial Revolution and colonial systems.

BATCH OUTPUT: STANDARDISED STUDENTS

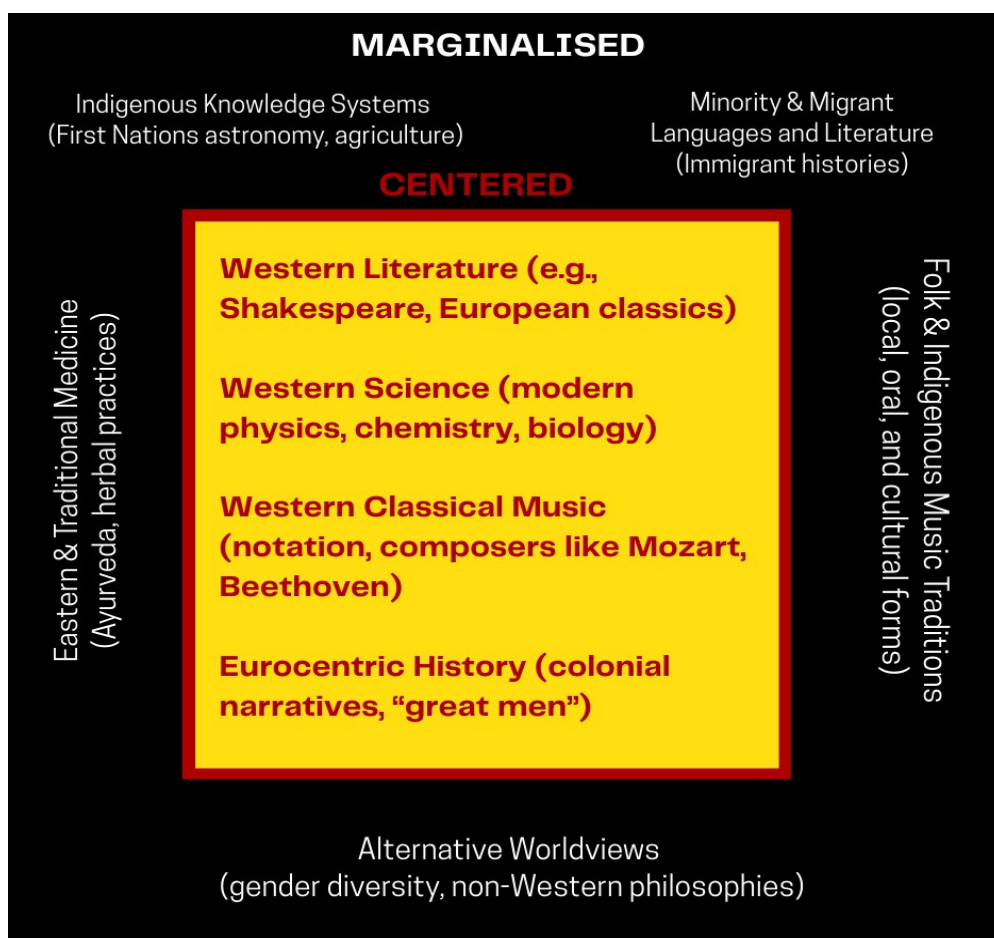


The content we studied reinforced this narrow focus, placing certain knowledges firmly at the centre and pushing others to the margins.

We learned Western science, Western music, Western literature, while other knowledges and voices remained absent.

Capitalism, privatisation, and commercialisation have only deepened this. Education became a marketplace, with students as products. The “best-sellers” were those with the highest test scores – uniform, well-packaged, and functional. Plato’s *functionalist model* divided citizens to meet the needs of the state; today, education often functions to meet the needs of business (Noddings, 2015).

Yet the world we live in now is interdependent, multicultural, and dynamic. As Rousseau (Noddings, 2015) argued, we need an *open education* of doing, feeling and observing, and as hooks (1994) reminds us, open learning communities thrive on interdependence, not dependency. We are cognitive beings with the capacity to actively organise and adapt our knowledge. Freire (2000) urges us to live and learn through past, present, and future, continuously transforming ourselves.



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And so I began to ask: *Where is the educational revolution?*

If learning is life itself, why do so many students approach it like it's a death sentence? Why is curiosity - the very thing that fuels intellectual and personal growth - often the first casualty of formal schooling?

This was my beginning.

But it is not where my learning story ends.

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2. Growth: The Awakening of the Mind

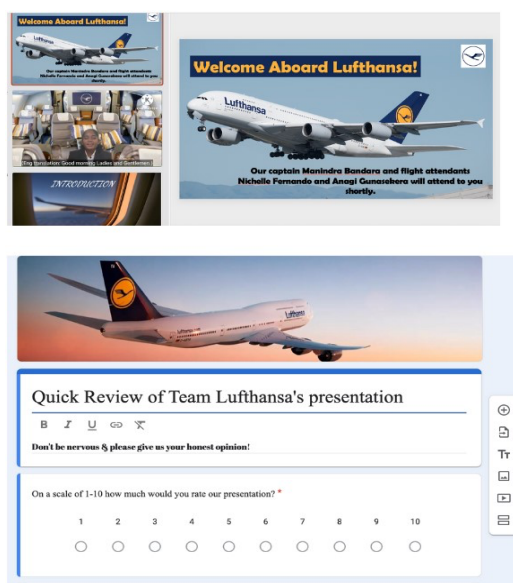
If Post 1 was the birth of my educational story - shaped by cultural expectations, competition, and the pursuit of grades - this chapter marks the moment I discovered that learning could be something else entirely.

That realisation began when I moved from my local curriculum to the Pearson Edexcel International A-Levels. Gone was the relentless rote memorisation. In its place was active, applied, and relational learning. My business teacher knew each student's name, background, and interests. Content wasn't just delivered — it was personalised.

We explored real company case studies: identifying vision and mission statements, analysing corporate social responsibility, and researching opportunities and risks. These tasks demanded critical thinking, creativity, and teamwork. Through peer evaluations, group projects, and presentations, I developed active listening, collaborative problem-solving, and the ability to build on others' knowledge.

One of the group projects stood out. Tasked with improving a company's operations, there was no single "right" answer - only solutions we could justify through evidence, theory, and collaboration. This echoed Freire's (2000) **problemposing education** - learning as a cycle of reflection and action (praxis), where knowledge is co-created.

SNAPSHOTS FROM OUR LUFTHANSA BUSINESS CASE STUDY & PEER REVIEW

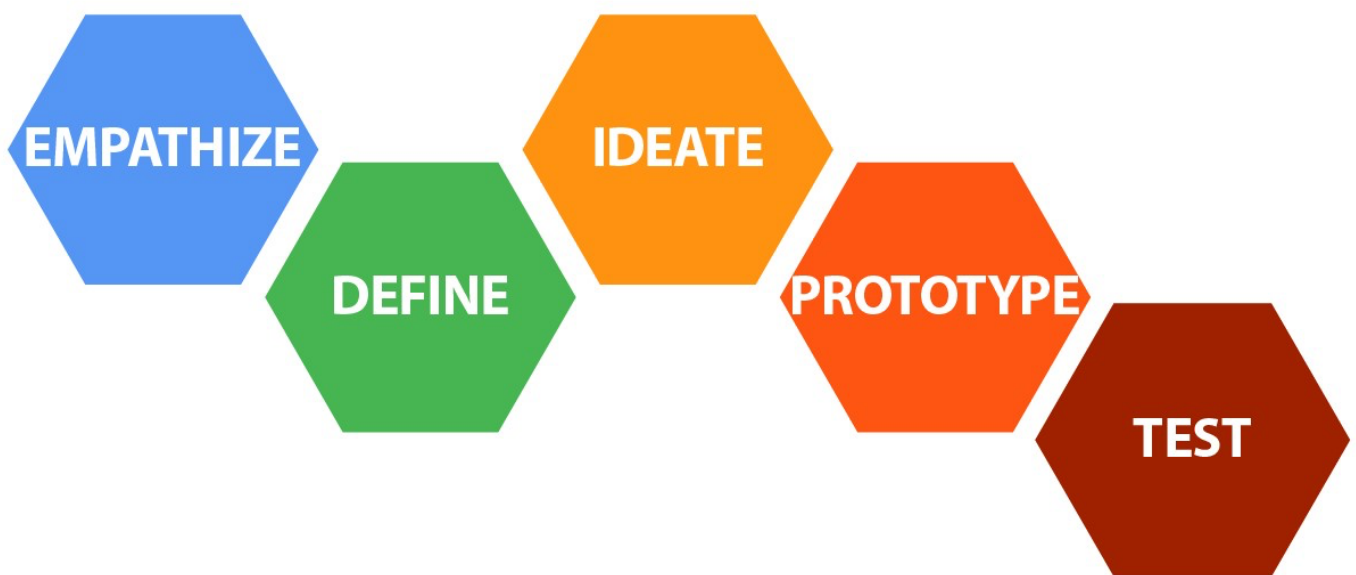


2022 Lufthansa case study – presentation and peer feedback survey, demonstrating collaboration and real-world application.

From Design Thinking to My Learning Cycle

Later at university, a design thinking unit reshaped my understanding of how learning works. The Stanford d.school model (2010) - *empathise, define, ideate, prototype, test* - wasn't just for design; it was a blueprint for education.

Design Thinking: Five Key Steps



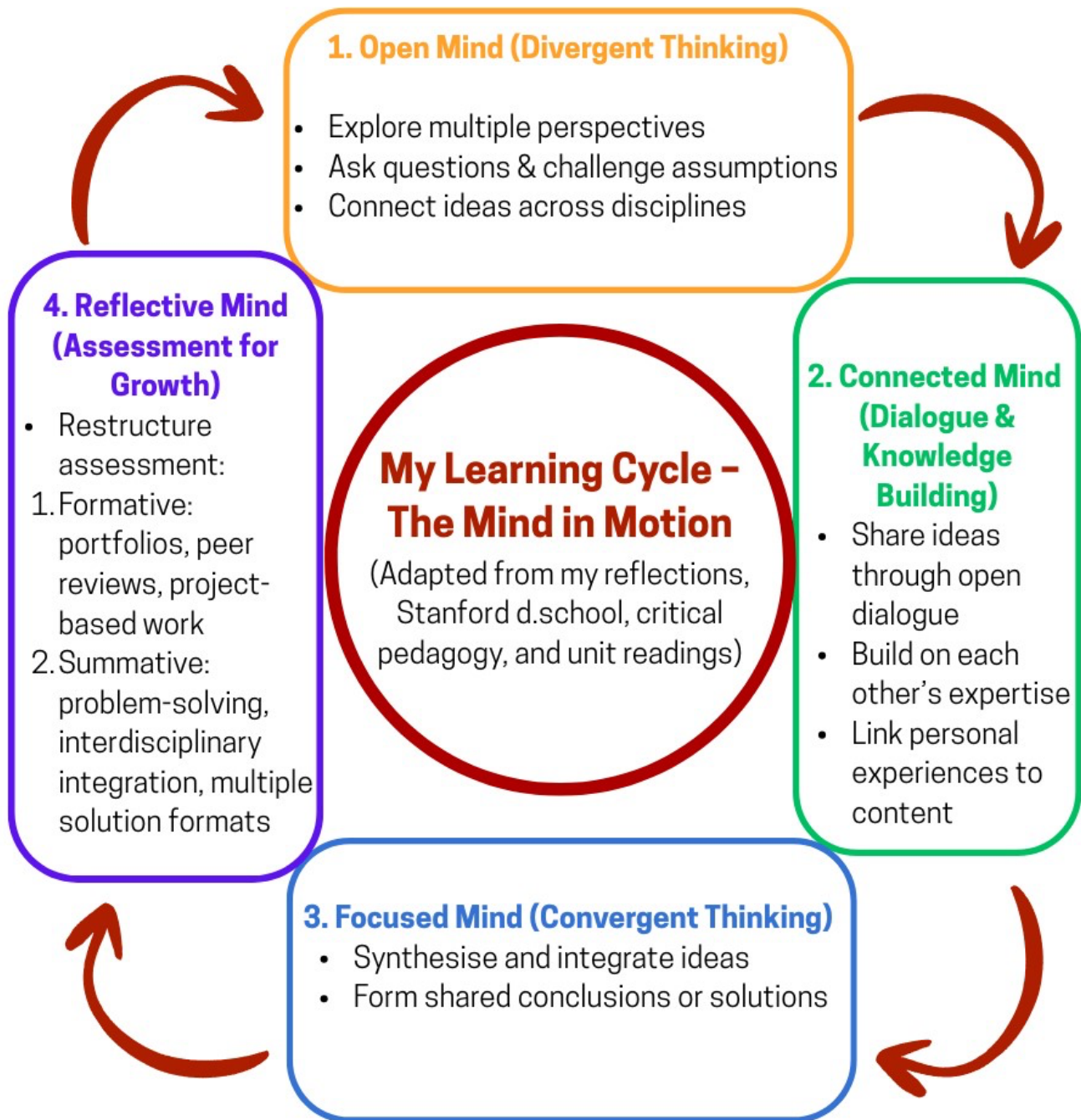
Stanford d.school's five key stages of design thinking - a process I later adapted into my own learning cycle model.

Drawing on this, critical pedagogy, and unit readings, I developed my own model:

This cycle moves through four interconnected “minds”:

- **Open Mind** (divergent thinking)
- **Connected Mind** (dialogue & knowledge building)
- **Focused Mind** (convergent thinking)
- **Reflective Mind** (assessment for growth)

It shifts education from a one-way transfer to a reciprocal process — dynamic, inclusive, and human-centred.



Why This Matters

The London A-Levels gave me my first taste of this kind of education; the design thinking project cemented it. Interviewing blind artists for a case study on employability in the arts, my team used empathy maps, redefined problems, prototyped solutions, and tested ideas. Peer reviews deepened the process.

This was education as a living cycle - evolving, adapting, and always grounded in dialogue and mutual growth. Not a straight line to a final destination, but a **mind in motion**.

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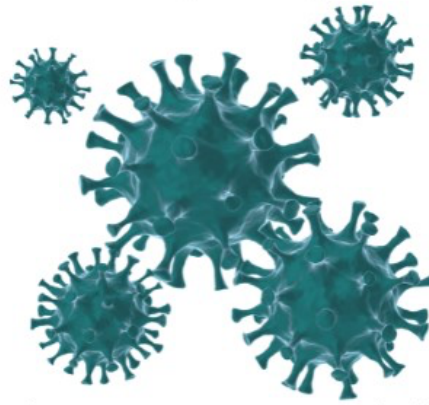
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3. Connection & Truth: Learning to Live and Learn Together

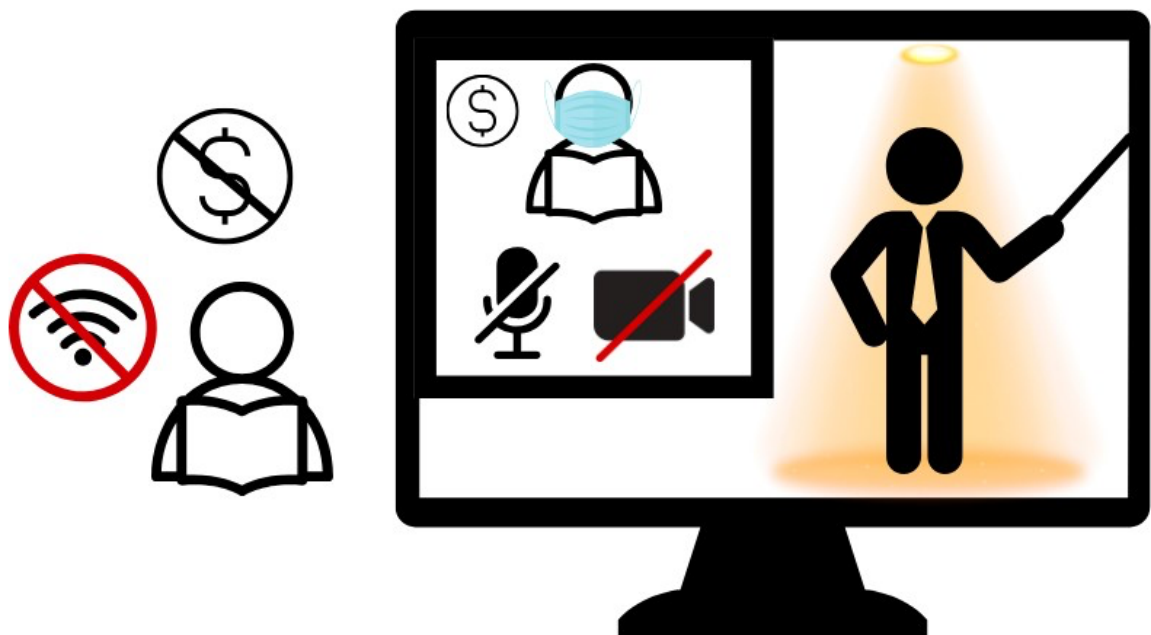
If Post 2 was about my awakening to active learning, this is about recognising that learning is not just what we know, but who we are together.

During COVID-19, the classroom became a grid of silent black rectangles. The digital set-up was functional but not social, amplifying what was already broken: one-way content delivery, minimal space for human connection, and students drifting into disengagement.

COVID-19 didn't just spread a virus...



...it helped super-spread the virus of traditional education.

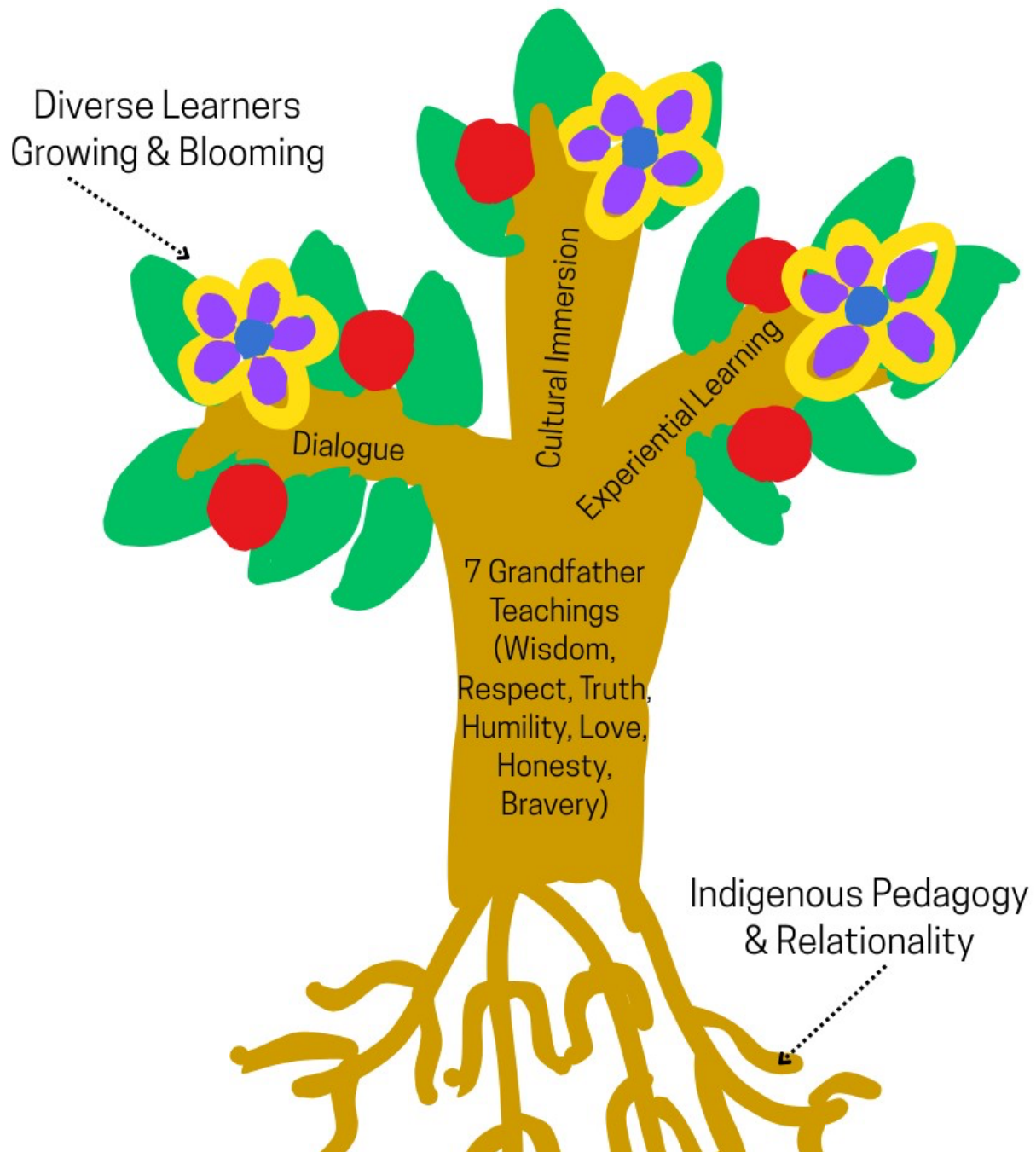


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Hooks (1994) speaks of a “zealous will to learn” - the passion and excitement that make learning joyful. I saw how easily this spark is lost when curiosity and connection are missing. Dialogue, as Socrates modelled, is more than a teaching method; it is the foundation for critical thinking and shared understanding (Noddings, 2015). Questioning, listening, and co-constructing ideas keep learning alive.

Educational culture, therefore, must be more than a delivery system for content. It should embed empathy, humility, respect, and truth - values that also echo the Seven Grandfather Teachings in the Niichii Project (2021): wisdom, respect, truth, humility, love, honesty, and bravery. These are not “add-ons” but the living fabric of classroom life.

Drawing from Indigenous pedagogy, the Niichii Project (2021) emphasises the human–world relationship, relationality, and cultural immersion. The idea that “language is alive” struck me deeply. In the project, language learning is not memorising lists; it is living the language - through story, tradition, and community.



Growing Through Indigenous Pedagogy: My visual representation of the Niichii Project's teachings and outcomes. © Designed by Anagi Thanuja Gunasekera using Canva.

By contrast, my own schooling experience learning Tamil as a language felt more technical - focused on vocabulary, grammar, and exam preparation - without the deep cultural immersion of conversation and literature. Meanwhile, my main language, Sinhala, was taught with a rich historical and literary context.

This difference reflected a broader pattern in the schooling environment: multiculturalism was often expressed in harmony-focused ways, such as celebrating festivals like Deepavali, Vesak, Eid, and Christmas, which brought joy to school life but did not often open space for deeper conversations about inequality, privilege, or whose histories were told. Apple (2012) situates this within the politics of official knowledge, where conservative restoration preserves dominant cultural norms through selective inclusion and centralised control. Diversity is acknowledged, but in safe, symbolic ways that avoid challenging the prevailing worldview.

This is the hidden curriculum in action - the unspoken lessons about whose knowledge and culture matter. As Freire (2000) argues, the “banking model” doesn’t just deposit facts; it deposits the hierarchies of the system. hooks’ (1994) engaged pedagogy offers an alternative: classrooms as open learning communities where every voice is valued.

In the broader schooling system, the hidden curriculum made STEM the pinnacle of high achievement, treating arts and humanities as secondary. History was told almost entirely from a Sinhala-Buddhist perspective, with minority experiences absent. This narrowing, often justified as “standards” or “meritocracy,” produced static, test-driven teaching and erased important conversations - about gender equality, human rights, or sexual diversity. Avoiding discomfort doesn’t erase inequality; it makes it invisible.

Truth in education means revealing the dominant narrative and deliberately including other perspectives. It means asking, “Whose voice is here? Who is missing?” and inviting students to research, tell, and debate those missing stories. This inclusion must go beyond token multiculturalism.

This commitment to inclusion also requires recognising learner variability - the diversity of students’ socio-economic backgrounds, lived experiences, and learning preferences. The [Universal Design for Learning \(CAST, 2024\)](#) offers a practical framework for this, advocating for multiple means of engagement, representation, and action/expression. By designing with flexibility, we can honour different ways of knowing and ensure that every learner — not just those who fit a dominant model - can access, contribute to, and shape the shared learning journey.

Engaging Learner Variability in a Connected Classroom **(Adapted from CAST Universal Design for Learning Guidelines, 2024)**

Multiple Ways to Engage (Why students learn)

- Create a classroom culture of empathy, humility, respect, and truth
- Build learning around dialogue, questioning, and co-construction of ideas
- Link content to students' lived experiences and cultural backgrounds

Multiple Ways to Represent Ideas (What students learn)

- Present concepts through stories, visuals, and real-world case studies
- Include cultural immersion elements (language, traditions, community knowledge)
- Offer varied entry points — from concrete examples to abstract reasoning

Multiple Ways to Express Learning (How students show learning)

- Allow choice in how students share understanding — discussion, art, writing, or multimedia
- Encourage collaborative projects and peer feedback
- Support iterative work that builds from reflection to action

Engaging Learner Variability in a Connected Classroom. Adapted from CAST Universal Design for Learning Guidelines (2024). © Designed by Anagi Thanuja Gunasekera using Canva.

In a connected classroom, students are not just recipients of information; they are co-creators of a shared learning journey. This mirrors the dialogic, relational nature of my Learning Cycle - where knowledge is built through interaction, respect, and shared responsibility.

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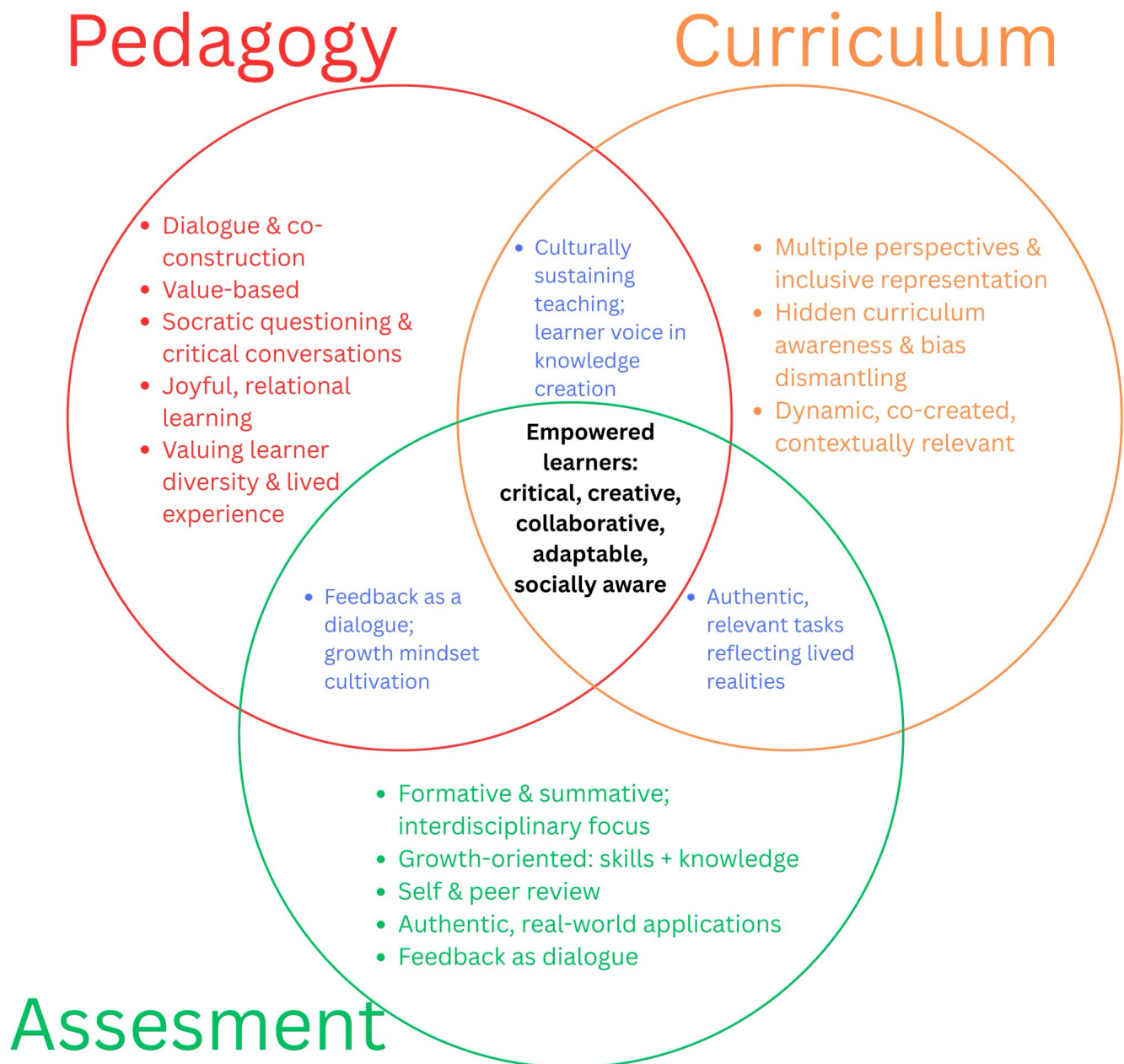
4. Liberation & Renewal: Pedagogy, Curriculum, and Assessment as One Integrated Whole

In Post 3, I explored how the *zealous will to learn* (hooks, 1994) and the art of dialogue — questioning, listening, and co-creating meaning - can transform classrooms into spaces of connection and truth. But connection is not the end point. When that spark catches, it fuels something larger: a movement towards liberation and renewal in education.

The more I studied, the more I realised that many of the answers we search for today have existed for centuries. As discussed in Noddings (2015), Socrates taught through dialogue, Rousseau championed learning by doing, Piaget showed that learners construct knowledge, and Herbart understood that new ideas grow from past experiences. Yet these insights have been buried beneath standardisation, competition, and control.

Giroux (2014) warns of *dead zones of the imagination*, where curiosity is replaced by compliance and performance metrics, turning schools into “disimagination machines” that confuse education with narrow training. In contrast, hooks’ (1994) vision of *teaching to transgress* imagines classrooms alive with intellectual excitement - open learning communities where every voice matters.

Breaking the factory model of schooling, as Robinson (2010) described, means rejecting one-size-fits-all approaches and embracing curiosity, dialogue, and cocreation. Here, the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework (CAST, 2024) offers practical guidance: designing for learner variability by providing multiple means of engagement, representation, and expression.



An integrated view of pedagogy, curriculum, and assessment, grounded in my reflections and supported by key educational theories. © Designed by Anagi Thanuja Gunasekera using Canva

My reflections now come full circle. Pedagogy is not simply about delivery - it is about creating spaces for dialogue, agency, and shared growth. Curriculum is never neutral - it can reproduce dominant narratives or deliberately challenge them. And assessment, when reimagined, can be more than a measure; it can be a mirror and a map - reflecting learning honestly while guiding the next steps in the journey.

My own Learning Cycle - *Open Mind, Connected Mind, Focused Mind, Reflective Mind* - brings these three together. It is not a fixed sequence but a living process, echoing Freire's (2000) notion of praxis: reflection and action in constant motion.

The same seeds that grow in a connected classroom - empathy, humility, respect, truth - can transform entire systems. In the circle of learning is the cycle of living: no final product, only new beginnings. The choice is ours to shape this future together.

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