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Regenerative Education Design

A Co-Creative Exploration of Online Academic Learning

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Article

Regenerative Education Design: A Co-Creative Exploration of Online Academic Learning

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Abstract

This article explores applying regenerative development approaches in an Amsterdam-based university course on "Education and International Development" during the COVID-19 pandemic. A transnational team examined possibilities and challenges in virtual/hybrid learning, focusing on co-creative pedagogies to enhance engagement and mutual learning. The study uses auto-ethnographic narratives, reflection questions, and student insights to reflect on critical, transgressive, decolonising, and contemplative pedagogies. Findings highlight three design premises for regenerative approaches to higher education: paradigm shifting for purpose-driven education; living system thinking for co-creative pedagogy; and holistic developmental learning for being-education. This research contributes to innovative educational practices in international fields of study and invites readers in a reflective reading experience.

Keywords: regenerative education design; transgressive learning; decentring and decolonising education; student agency; engaged online pedagogies; learners' and educators' well-being

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1. Introduction

1.1. Walking the Talk of Regenerative Education Design

> *"The course was different to any other I have done from its outset. Not only was it virtual, which added the necessity to engage with other learners and lecturers in new ways, it was also very much student-led and -focused. I found this to be empowering and gave me the chance to take more responsibility in my own learning, more than I have done in the past."*
>
> (student)

In the afternoon of 17 April 2020, amidst the uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic, the course design team gathered virtually to begin redesigning the four-week bachelor course "Education and International Development". As the start of the course was approaching, we wanted to reinvent the curriculum and pedagogical approach in a short amount of time. Yet, we purposefully took time to connect—checking in on how we coped with lockdown and the stresses it presented; from strained family dynamics abroad to

juggling work and childcare in small urban apartments, we related our shared struggles to those prospective students would likely face. We shared a commitment to nurture the course community. Despite pressures, we held fast to aspirations in the course's long legacy: to spark students' engagement through an interactive, collaborative learning space.

Designing virtually through pandemic constraints clarified our vision to 'walk the talk' of regenerative learning where care for human well-being and meaningful learning-relationships were supported. This approach meant not just *learning about* education in relation to international development but co-creating learning experiences that empower students. We explored the field of Education and International Development Studies from an interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approach. We engaged with transnational colleagues who are embedded in (educational and development) practice, policy, and research realms. This shows a change in International Development Studies which brings it closer to practice while countering and decentring colonial legacies by co-creating with international colleagues' shared learning [1–3]. The preparations started months before the course. Beyond the lecturer, the junior lecturers responsible for seminars, student assistants, and co-creators not based in Amsterdam were consciously included. In the 2020 course, they were from Myanmar, and in the 2021 course, they worked in/from Sri Lanka. The pandemic and online/hybrid format made it possible to expand beyond traditional 'guest lecturing' and facilitated co-creation through meaningful integration of personal and professional experiences and knowledge of contexts.

Instead of jumping into practicalities, and inspired by regenerative development and design processes [4], we worked on "imaging" what the experience of the pandemic was like for students and how the course could serve them, by taking a moment to internally "see a film of what something aims to become" [4], followed by structured journaling and sharing reflections. Through the co-creation, we continued to check in with how we were (truly) doing, following conscious reflection exercises using living-systems frameworks [4,5]. This regenerative approach allowed us to work from potential for innovation, rather than staying in status quo or even a survival mode during the pandemic.

1.2. How This Article Came into Being

The COVID-19 pandemic and the consequent need to shift education into online spaces put additional strain on learners and educators who already deal with the everyday stress of the neoliberal university and output-oriented environment [2,6]. Keeping these concerns in mind, we provided students with non-mandatory weekly check-in surveys to reflect on their well-being, stress, and insights. They were used to keep the teaching team informed of students' well-being, but also for students to check in with themselves without the pressure to perform.

When the course ended, and students' evaluations and self-reflection essays were reviewed; we felt a collective urge to continue working together, craft this article, and thereby make sense of our experiences and share our story. This article is thus a product of a shared process of introspective, retrospective, and prospective reflections. Over the course of analysing and writing, colleagues joining later editions of the course joined the article writing and mutual learning processes. This is the result of contributions of all authors involved—through online team meetings, and several rounds of verbal and written input—extending beyond the co-creative spirit of the course and into the article. We hope that by making explicit our experiences and learning, it may serve as inspiration for collaboration across disciplines and borders for other educators too.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Methods

Our research focuses on qualitative data gathered from the course in 2020 and 2021. The course is taught every year in the Dutch spring semester, and students are third- or second-year bachelor students, exchange students, and pre-master students. In these years, teaching was undertaken in online and hybrid settings. We collected two forms of qualitative "data" from the two years: four weekly check-in surveys and final student reflection papers. Students were asked for written informed consent twice for their survey responses and papers to be included in the research anonymously. They were asked about their consent in the first survey and for confirmation of this in the fourth and final survey of the course. Of the 91 students in 2020 and 97 students in 2021 who gave their consent, we randomly sampled 95 survey responses from the four weeks and 30 papers from 2020, and 102 survey responses and 30 papers from 2021. Samples were drawn randomly after dividing the students into three seminar groups to avoid biases in terms of alphabetical order of names, grading, and other ranking. The survey responses and final papers were anonymised and coded. From the initial open coding, we agreed on a final codebook with 8 codes linking our theoretical grounding and course themes: co-creation, virtual learning space, engagement with international colleagues, critical pedagogy/social justice, engagement with the political environment, conscious-focused practices, motivation, and care for students' well-being. Codes were collectively selected, and the sampled dataset was coded by the team of authors collaboratively.

The same codes were used for the data from 2020 and 2021. Coding and analysis were collaborative efforts between two teams of research assistants, supervised by the lead lecturer. It was important for our diverse team to communicate ideas and findings across different members engaged in the analysis and writing process, which carried the spirit of open collaboration and co-creation beyond the boundaries of the courses and into our analysis and writing. We acknowledge that as researchers, we play an active role in identifying, interpreting, and constructing themes through a reflexive process of coding and analysis [7,8]. Our analytic work is thus not a mechanical extraction of themes, but a theoretically informed, iterative, and interpretive process where we collectively assigned codes, reviewed them, and from there developed key themes as written down in the analysis of this article.

In this article, the survey responses and final papers are complimented by auto-ethnographic accounts from the teaching team which are woven into the text. In line with our theoretical and epistemological reflections (detailed below), we have humbly attempted to weave aspects of our varied (multi)disciplinary and episto-ontological backgrounds as authors together into a text to show the pluriversity of voices. We recognise the limitations of offering a university course within existing institutional boundaries and hierarchies, meaning for instance only some of us were eligible to assess and grade students' contributions. Within those limitations, our methodological design is inspired by a decolonial approach to qualitative research and the need to engage with critical reflection, reciprocity and (student) agency, (un)learning and re-imagining pluriverse knowledges, and embodying transformative praxis [9].

2.2. Theoretical Framing and Research Design

We ground this article in the theoretical framing of Regenerative Development and Design theories and connect those to an interdisciplinary mix of theoretical and pedagogical approaches. Throughout the article, we incorporated reflection questions which we worked with ourselves during the course, offering moments of pause to invite your engagement as a reader in the reflective process.

As you decided to pick up this text, we assume that like us, you care deeply about education and recognise the transformative potential this system carries. Perhaps you entered the field as an educator or student with the initial belief that if we care for the next generations and planetary health, education systems are crucial to invest in. Before diving further into the contents of this article which reflect more deeply on these matters, we **invite you as reader to set a conscious intention for your reading experience with these engaged reading questions**:

- ♣ What is the potential of reading this article—for you, and for the people whose life you aim to make a difference in with your work?
- ♣ What state of being and mind will it take from you, as a reader, to wake up your thinking so that you can meaningfully engage with this article?
- ♣ How will you make sure that insights flowing from reading this article will be effectuated in your actions?

Our approach starts with regenerative development and design principles and frameworks, which forms part of an emerging scholarly and pedagogical field of endeavour [10]. The design of the theoretical framing and course has been informed by the guidance of the coordinating lecturer as a regenerative educator and engagement with the Regenesis Institute [11]. Our epistemological grounding is influenced by key design principles developed by Regenesis co-founders Pamela Mang and Ben Haggard. We draw specifically on three regenerative principles: (1) small "nodal" interventions in the right places can create beneficial, system-wide effects, (2) a project can only have a systemic benefit within a field of caring, co-creativity, and co-responsibility, and (3) regenerating systems like education require connecting inner and outer work/transformations [4] (p. 178).

The triad framework introduced below in Figure 1 guided our course design process and is applied here to structure our theoretical framing and consequent analysis. Figure 2 illustrates how these interdisciplinary ontological and epistemological sources from Regenerative Development and Design theory are translated into three interconnected design premises to develop regenerative approaches in (higher) education.

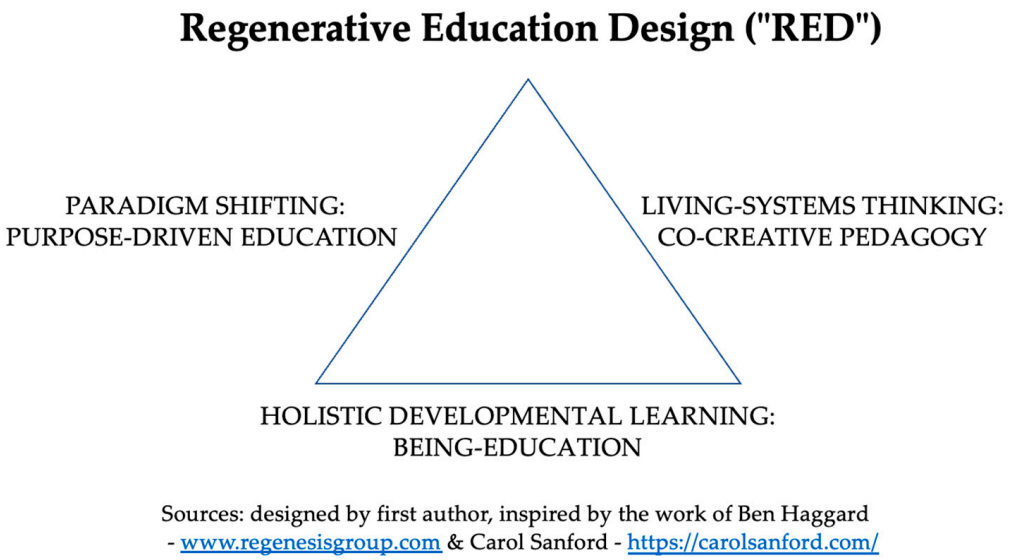

Figure 1. Regenerative Education Design (RED).

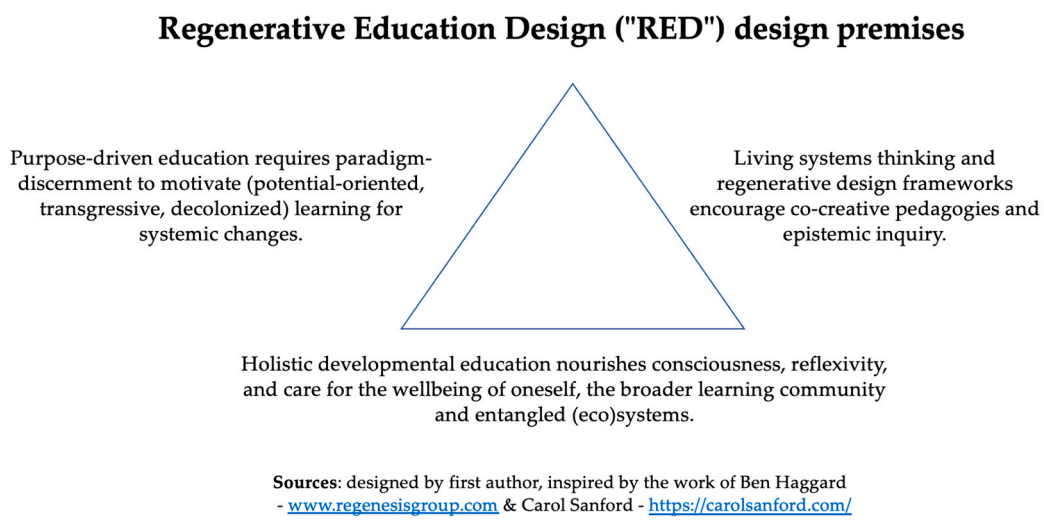

Figure 2. RED premises.

2.3. Paradigm-Shifting: Purpose-Driven Education

As we now zoom into the three connected design premises which form an alternative and regenerative design approach to education, we also aim to sketch the contrast of what we currently observe within the status quo of a majority of existing (higher) education systems—and why we recognise the need for a different approach. Education systems follow suit with dominant capitalist paradigms over the past half century, which has resulted in machine-like governance models of education systems and highly individualistic, competitive, and efficiency-oriented learning cultures. Shifting to a regenerative paradigm requires moving from problem-based to potential-oriented learning at all scales. From governance decisions, agenda-setting at global levels, and standardised and competitiveness-driven ranking systems, to national, local and institutional/school level. Our work responds to the need for the system as well as the teaching team to learn and develop and simultaneously rethink and re-do our education.

A fundamental need for a paradigm shift underlines this shift in epistemological discernment [12]. The way in which a mechanistic and neoliberal-informed paradigm shapes how most educators are trained constrains them from recognising their agency to teach beyond the test, and towards more conscious and purpose-driven approaches to education to foster the needed systemic changes to address wicked problems [13,14], or meta-crises [15]. Investments in terms of money are crucial, since education sectors across the globe are underfunded (compared to defence sectors, [16]). From a regenerative paradigm, investments in the education sector *also* require a drastic shift in our epistemologies [17].

This shift includes the need to recognise and transgress unequal intersectional [18] power asymmetries, and the need to decolonise and decentre approaches to knowledge development and research [1,9,19,20]. Engaging with decolonial thinking invited us as a team to question the extent to which our intended co-creative collaborations could challenge, or where it still reproduces existing colonial and institutional hierarchies. Inspired by colleagues' reflective invitations, we recognise that engaging in decolonial work requires (epistemic) humility and needs an ethics of solidarity and care to work through discomfort and painful realisations of one's own and systemic failures [3,21].

A regenerative approach requires us to move beyond fixing problems which reproduce the status quo and develop learning ecosystems with a holistic orientation to purpose, process, and values of education. A regenerative design fosters the capacities needed to *transgress* current ways of learning [17,22,23], and invite reflective, introspective approaches to research [10].

As a **suggested reflective break**, we invite you to not rush into the next section but create a moment of pause, perhaps look out the window or even go outside, and then reflect on the effects of these questions for your thinking. In class, we suggest our students to engage their reflective skills by journaling, which you might also want to do:

- How do you see the transgressive potential of education (systems) for broader systemic changes in the world? How might this insights enhance your drive to educate with/for a larger purpose?
- What shifts in your current thinking and behaviour are needed to upgrade the value you are adding, for instance as you move from problem-based learning into potential-oriented learning?
- What might be required (from you personally, those you learn/work with, and within the broader system) for a movement to decolonise and decentre the content and pedagogical approaches in your field of study/learning?

2.4. Living-Systems Thinking: Co-Creative Pedagogy

Wicked challenges [13] require perspectives on and organisation of education systems to radically change [24]. Perhaps your context, educational trajectory, learning experiences, and future dreams of what education can and should become are present as you engage with this text. Otherwise, the former sentence functions as an invitation to bring alive in yourself these experiences. We wish to invite a practice of 'imaging'. In contrast to imagination or fantasy, this invites you to develop the capacity to discern a dynamic, living system image inside ourselves, inviting a more intuitive, body–mind informed understanding of a living (eco)system. The practice of imaging—a key aspect of living-system thinking—develops the capacity within us and students to grasp and ground a whole picture of complex relationality of planetary, societal, developmental, and educational challenges [4,10].

2.4.1. Co-Creation and Co-Learning

Building on years of experiences, we work with the premise that co-creation is key for regenerating and agency-enhancing education for students and educators [10,25–27]. While recognising that educators have unique roles to fulfil in developmental processes, the co-creation process requires teachers to become willing and able to let go off some control and take a step back to encourage others to step up—including student co-creators, colleague educators, and students [28].

The pandemic catalysed an emerging global paradigm shift, requiring education systems to respond and reshape society's direction. Our university course on education and international development was uniquely positioned to try this. With educators outside academia and on different continents, the virtual co-creation process allowed us to model inclusive, responsive education that the current moment requested. COVID-19 gave the opportunity for us to transform constraints into opportunities.

2.4.2. Engaged Contemplative Pedagogies for Transgressive Learning

Our choice to integrate contemplative pedagogies [29–31] in academic teaching is based on a non-hegemonic epistemological approach based on spiritual and indigenous ways of teaching and learning, centred on inner development and becoming increasingly self-managing [17]. This resonates with a larger movement to counter and complement existing foci on outer development, as illustrated by the Inner Development Goals movement [32]. While critics might point to the possible danger of solely focusing on a highly individualised inner gaze, we see the value of this movement when combined with a simultaneous commitment to outer transformations. A regenerative design principle suggests that developmental processes require us to dedicate time and energy to simultaneously

actualise self- and system-development [4]. This means doing the inner work in order to meaningfully contribute to outer, systemic changes [17].

In this course, we worked on our collective ableness to meaningfully discern our pedagogical choices, which were informed by engaged and transgressive pedagogical movements [22,23], relational pedagogies of entanglement [33], and regenerative higher education [10,34]. As a teaching team, we engaged with the RED premises during the design, implementation, and in retrospective reflections to remind ourselves of *how* we intend to function together, in co-creation with students and each other. Connecting to the premise of paradigm shifting, we continuously aimed to keep ourselves and each other awake to embody our engagement with decolonial praxis and transgressive learning through collective and individual epistemic inquiry.

Before moving into the next section, allow yourself some time to pause and after a few deeper breaths, write about the following:

- As a learner and/or educator, how do you habitually make choices about how you go about designing/teaching/studying within a course or learning trajectory?
- What could you develop within yourself to increase your current capabilities to consciously design the ways in which you choose to teach/study? What difference do you sense this would make for the people who (directly and ultimately) benefit from the learning processes?
- Which people, networks, or learning communities would best align with and nourish your current and aspired (co-creative) ways of learning/teaching? Based on this reflection, what concrete step can you start taking tomorrow?

2.5. Holistic Developmental Learning: Being-Education

In academic settings, with their dominant focus on cognitive intelligence, it seems perhaps radical to speak of "being-education", which in contrast focuses on developing consciousness and reflectiveness. Founding educators in the regenerative development field argue that we need to expand the mind that is at work [17,35]. And while words like 'holistic' or 'being' can be interpreted as vague, this aspect of regenerative work has great potential to develop learning communities committed to every member's developmental potential—students and educators included. This requires courage on behalf of teachers and students. Philomena Essed calls this "responsible risk taking" [36]:

> "tackling oppressive structures can be intimidating and fraught with risks. [...]. It also presents a unique opportunity for self-transformation, increased care for others, a more harmonious relationship with nature, and the betterment of the organizations and communities in which we live. This endeavour includes redefining the purpose and relevance of universities, particularly in safeguarding the future, be it human or non-human, in an increasingly uncertain world. [...]. The dividends of embracing responsible risk-taking in higher education, can be profound–a source of great joy, a pathway to the pleasures of learning, and a trove of enriching relationships."

This experience of learning as a place of joy, creativity, and community is often neglected in the overburdened university systems. Several scholars in academia have acknowledged the unavoidable stress in academy for teachers and students [2,37–40]. Slow scholarship, meaning slowing down the pace in academia, resists this tendency. This resistance movement builds on care and brings attention to how we work and to meaningful interactions in higher education spaces [41–43]. This can be even more challenging in online/hybrid environments where sickness, loneliness, and disruption of routines are looming. Additionally, the course focuses on key issues for the field related to social/societal injustices and systems of oppression. These themes can leave students feeling

overwhelmed and incapable of meaningful agency. Working from potential, we invited students to explore prospective self- and system-transformations, while creating space to be with frustration and discomfort [44].

Designing courses with students' and teachers' well-being at heart resonates with this regenerative design premise. It can be considered a political activity as we are "situated in institutions that devalue and militate against such relations" [42] (pp. 4–5). Caring for well-being is often deemed insignificant in academic environments, or paid lip service to. The surveys and check-ins during meetings and in class were ways to go against the corporatisation of universities. In the words of bell hooks,

> "Progressive, holistic education, "engaged pedagogy" is more demanding than conventional critical or feminist pedagogy. For, unlike these two teaching practices, it emphasizes well-being. That means that teachers must be actively committed to a process of self-actualization that promotes their own well-being if they are to teach in a manner that empowers students. Thich Nhat Hanh emphasized that the practice of a healer, therapist, teacher or any helping professional should be directed toward his or herself first, because if the helper is unhappy, he or she cannot help many people." [22] (p. 15)

This call from bell hooks for responsibility of behalf of teachers is both daunting and encouraging. In regenerative design, it can be operationalised through Socratic irony, or "posing intelligent questions to help others [and ourselves to] evolve their thinking and creativity" [17] (p. 101). Or what we started to call our (critical, regenerative) **questionability** [10]. This develops our ability to *be* with questions, rather than immediately striving to answer them, and to support fellow-learners/students to practice their ability to be with uncertainty. This is a radical act of resistance in academy so obsessed with problem solving and answers.

As a final post-theory intermezzo, we invite you to find the time to take a deep breath, look away from the screen and reflect on (maybe accompanied by journaling or drawing):

- ♣ What potential do you see in designing developmental education which encourages consciousness, reflexivity and care for student and educator well-being? How might principles of Socratic questioning, slow scholarship, and an ethics of care inform such a design?
- ♣ Could you identify people, (co-creation) teams, and communities that are also aligned to designing developmental education with this purpose? What might you (un)learn to enable your collective work?
- ♣ What might this mean for what you aim to develop in your abilities as educator/learner?

3. Results

We continue by sharing the outcomes of our analysis in three parts—taking the three design premises as a starting point for our analytical reflections. We reflect on the potential of regenerative course design for an online course, the pros and cons of (online) co-creation with a group of 90+ BA-level students, the benefits and challenges of virtual learning spaces, and our exploration to design a course with care for students' and lecturers' well-being.

3.1. Design Premise 1 Paradigm-Shifting: Purpose-Driven Education

We embark our analysis from the design premise that purpose-driven education requires paradigm-discernment to motivate (potential-oriented, transgressive, decolonised) learning for systemic changes. In this section, we follow the results of our coding and consequent analysis. Complimenting this with our (autoethnographic) reflections as an author team, we write about (1) educating with/for a larger purpose—shifting from problem-based

to potential-oriented, transgressive learning, and (2) shifting perspectives: transnationally exploring decentring and decolonising learning.

3.1.1. Educating with/for a Larger Purpose—Shifting from Problem-Based to Potential-Oriented, Transgressive Learning

At times, all of us in the teaching team felt overwhelmed by the pressures of education (and other economic or political) systems we engage in. It required considerable will and courage to create space to shift our thinking, from feeling victimised and stuck within a high pressure, high pace, exam-oriented system, into a place where we can (re)see deeper essence and potential of education systems and reflect on our agency. Rethinking, redoing, and unlearning ingrained habits of how we approached university courses, for both educators and learners, is not straightforward or simple. Yet normalising this continuous cycle of learning, unlearning, and relearning can open us to a developmental path. Exploring discomfort and insecurity as a teaching team to experiment with new ways of working and relating to students, and for students to find courage to step into new roles and ways of relating to their learning experience, had the effect of an increased sense of will and (re)finding purpose in our respective work.

Since we work from the premise that meaningful education needs redesign for the unique group and time, we avoided copying prior course manuals. The teaching team reflected on opportunities for rethinking the course, and a new purpose statement was made following a regenerative dynamic systems framework. This framework is called the "task cycle" [11]. It invited us to think of functioning capabilities, the process that is needed to accomplish the outcome, and finally what product(s) will be produced. Figure 3 illustrates how a shared purpose statement consequently functions as a centring point to stay accountable to the shared purpose.

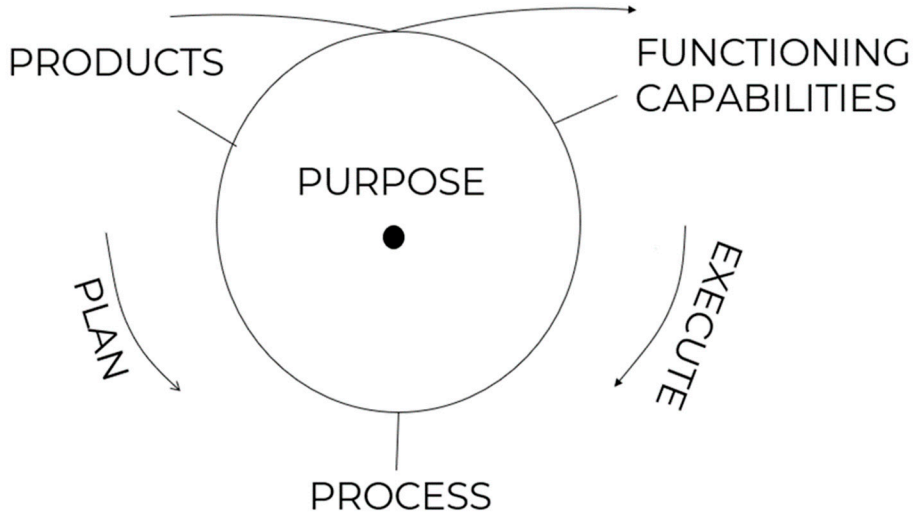

Figure 3. Task cycle [11].

The purpose statement was created in a three-step sentence, inspired again by the three core human capabilities (function-being-will), starting with:

- "to. . ." (the value-adding role of the task at hand), followed by
- "in a way that. . ." (on the how, and **being-qualities** of education), closing with
- "so that. . ." (connecting to a larger systemic purpose).

In our purpose statement from April 2020, we decided to highlight elements of innovativeness and well-being, within the context of a co-creative, transgressive learning space during the pandemic. The purpose of the Education and International Development 2020 course was as follows:

> *to design and co-create an innovative, healthy, challenging and safe online-learning space which develops understanding and connection to EID themes/principles in, in a way that is inclusive, and engages students and lecturers to experience the value and aliveness of alternative ways of education and personal/collective learning, so that it contributes to generating the transformative potential of this course, the field of International Development Studies and higher education.*

Purpose statements were co-developed and iteratively refined throughout preparations and during the course, as we often turned to the purpose statement to see if we still align with it, if our functional approach still followed our purpose. It functioned as our navigation point, or pole star, one which we as a team could discuss with students. In smaller teams, students were encouraged to use the task cycle and develop a shared purpose statement for their group projects. As our purpose statement illustrates, such a pole star provides not only a direction to make day-to-day pedagogical choices but also allows us to engage in our work as part of the evolution of a larger system—something we experienced as supporting us to feel more motivated and inspired to do things differently, with purpose.

In a similar fashion, we co-developed a purpose statement as we decided to reflect on our work in this article together. This has kept us committed and moving with a collaborative spirit over a longer stretch of writing time, with a large group of authors.

3.1.2. Shifting Perspectives: Transnationally Exploring Decentring and Decolonising Learning

A key feature of the course was the transnational character of the teaching team, living across various geographical spaces, including those in Amsterdam and the Netherlands (yet many with international roots) and those from Myanmar and Sri Lanka. This offered students hands-on accounts of how the courses' study topics are relevant in various parts of the globe. The non-Amsterdam based members of our teaching teams did not simply give lectures, but co-created the course design from the start, and all of us supplemented course content with personal and professional experiences and storytelling of studying or working in their respective home countries. Not only did this invite students to engage with study topics from a personalised perspective, it also allowed them to reflect on the diversity of learning and teaching styles in different educational and geographical systems. Moreover, we aimed to engage with what Pailey [45] calls the decentring of the 'white gaze' of development, through the intentional co-creation and co-ownership of colleagues across transnational borders, which included voices of (mostly female) scholars and practitioners of colour, from different socioeconomic, ethnic, and religious backgrounds.

Student responses to these diverse teaching teams were overwhelmingly positive in both years. They highlighted benefits of learning about an issue through personal and critical accounts told by a person directly involved in the subject. According to a statement of one student: "I think people speaking out of personal experience is one of the most valuable ways of learning from someone" was echoed by learners who described the sessions with international educators as "inspirational", "passionate", "humbling", and "thought-provoking"(student). Students appreciated learning from different people from the same context. This strengthened their awareness of multiple positionalities and privileges in international environments and contributed to decolonising classrooms by diversifying perspectives from the majority world [46]. The majority world refers to countries who have historically been referred to as "developing" and highlights the fact that the majority of the world's population resides here. Some students reflected on the fact that critical and decolonial discussions tend to problematise issues in the majority world instead of examining how coloniality is continued in classrooms in the Global North, or minority world—something we aimed to challenge in this course. Many students expressed

they appreciated learning about personal stories and backgrounds instead of having "token teachers" from the majority world teaching the same content as minority world teachers, which aligned with our aspirations to co-create spaces for meaningful engagement and non-hierarchical learning.

3.2. Design Premise 2 Living-Systems Thinking: Co-Creative Pedagogy

We now turn our analytical gaze to reflect on the premise that living-systems thinking and regenerative design frameworks encourage co-creative pedagogies and epistemic inquiry. We first zoom into how as a teaching team we aimed to embody—rather than just 'teach about'—living-system thinking, by integrating regenerative design frameworks in our course design, class design, and post-teaching reflections. We integrated insights from students' experiences of the co-creative teaching environment, and methods, as a way to ground and test our own thinking. Secondly, we reflect on the contextual constraints which emerged as we analysed both students' and our own auto-ethnographic data, including limits to alternative payment structures for transnational teaching teams, and the limitations of existing grading systems, which emerged as key themes from our coding process. Thirdly, we elaborate on the perceived and experienced opportunities and challenges of co-creative pedagogical design.

3.2.1. Embodying Living System Thinking and Regenerative Frameworks in Online Co-Creation and Co-Learning

In our online preparation sessions before and during the course, we grounded ourselves with 'wake-up' questions to start meetings in a more conscious manner, often reflecting on how we were at that moment, using function/being/will. We restrained ourselves from jumping into practicalities by connecting to our core intentions and states of being. This allowed us to become more discerning about the types of pedagogical choices we made, with and for students.

For instance, we decided to challenge the habitual chronological order of sessions which is common in university syllabi, usually starting with a historical perspective on the field, and later turning to the counter-hegemonic approaches. Instead of just challenging the chronology, we purposely brought a historical framing into the course at a later moment to help students contextually understand how chronological orders have created hegemonic paradigms, thereby realising the need to counter it. In this way, we became transparent about designing a university course in terms of pedagogy and content towards and together with students.

We tested the premise that learning flourishes when all participants, educators and learners, are co-responsible and when they co-create learning. This served as an attempt to transgress hierarchies and traditional student-teacher roles. When learners were invited to take responsibility, this created more equal learning fields and less hierarchical approaches to developing learners' agency. When they take education into their own hands, learners connect better to their intrinsic motivation, something students reported was often not given attention to in prior education trajectories. As written down after the course by a Myanmar-based colleague in 2020: "*giving students a space to learn and being able to take charge of their learning was great. The students were motivated and came up with all kinds of creative ideas to communicate their learning. Being flexible, adaptable and taking responsible risks is key to learning*".

Co-creation happened among learners, between learners and educators, and among educators. A co-creation-oriented pedagogy goes beyond collaboration and describes a deeper commitment to take individual and collective responsibility for the quality and depth of the learning. In the course, this took the form of student-led seminars and students voting on themes to be included in the curriculum. Students reflected positively on their

engagement, especially compared to other online learning spaces that often confine students to passive receivers of pre-determined knowledge.

For most students, this course was their first encounter with co-creation. Many stated that co-creating the course helped them to stay committed despite being physically isolated from real-life learning and fellow students. Students appreciated seeing the teaching team make efforts to create an online classroom that was accessible and participatory and in turn felt encouraged to contribute as the course's success felt like a joint effort. However, some students pointed out that online learning during COVID-19 contributed to an over-digitalisation of education, expressing dissatisfaction with their inability to form in-person learning communities. These insights influenced our return to on-site education in recent editions of the course after the pandemic.

3.2.2. Opportunities and Challenges of Co-Creation in Online and Hybrid Learning Settings

On the one hand, co-creation increased students' motivation. On the other hand, students' reflections taught us that caution and clarity are needed when introducing co-creative methods. The engagement requirements of co-creation were often experienced as somewhat overwhelming, especially as students were used to more passive classrooms. The course's active and exploratory nature differed from students' expectations of passively receiving information. This pushed them outside their comfort zones, resulting in discomfort and unease, creating a constructive learning process [47]. As teaching team, we aimed to be transparent about our vulnerabilities in innovating our roles as educators, in engaging with "embodied listening" [48]. This opened a space for students–and lecturers-to practice being with their discomfort and acknowledging it as a force for development.

Students reflected on the non-hierarchical structure of co-created learning experiences where they felt heard and taken seriously by the teaching team and fellow students. They expressed greater sense of freedom and safety to share perspectives and learn through open dialogue and personal exchange between learners and educators. As one student commented: "*Now I know what a process of collective sense-making feels like*".

Smoothing out technical hick-ups emerged as an important contribution to students' positive experiences with online learning. Students appreciated that their suggestions were taken seriously, and solutions were sought with students rather than just for students. For example, in 2021, because of changing regulations during the pandemic, we had the option to offer smaller group hybrid sessions, with part of the students at university and others at home. After creating a conversation with students on challenges and potential of such learning situations, we all voted, resulting in a majority wishing to try it. While dividing our attention between onsite and offline learners was challenging, we experimented with co-facilitation and online support by student volunteers which gave them a space to act.

Reflections on the hybrid model were divided between positive and negative experiences, though most students' opinions were not clearly against or in favour. The (dis)connection between students in-person and online recurred as a theme, with some students feeling they were connected while especially students online maintained that it was still difficult to contribute meaningfully. Generally, students enjoyed the flexibility of the hybrid model which took their personal circumstances into consideration.

This was equally an obstacle for co-creation in hybrid learning. Many students found co-creation encouraging, although some students experienced the hybrid format as an obstacle, especially in group work where part of the group joined online and some in person. Technical difficulties and lacking opportunities to spontaneously connect was a source of frustration, which resulted in hampered team spirits and reduced communication. Given that this was the first time for many students encountering both hybrid learning

format and co-creation, some felt they spent a lot of energy adapting to this, which they could not invest in digesting content.

On a positive note, other students reported developing unexpected skills in the hybrid learning format, like their ability to focus in learning environments and speaking up in class, indicating these as valuable skills they like to develop further. Some students stated that breakout rooms mitigated barriers to active participation. By learners connecting in smaller clusters, micro-communities conferred a safety net, embracing those who struggled to find their voice and building their confidence to contribute. So, while the course structurally endorsed collective learning, interpersonal sanctuaries incubated the trust to get there. Especially students who followed the course predominantly or exclusively online expressed appreciation for the teaching team's and fellow students' efforts to create a welcoming, interactive, and engaging atmosphere in the online spaces.

3.2.3. Navigating Contextual Restraints

Because our course was nested within a specific university programme and context, there were limits to the innovation and 'doing things differently' we could adopt. In our experience of what it took to experiment with new ways of learning and being together in courses, it boils down to courage and time investment of the (coordinating) educator(s) to enter into conversations with programme managers, exam committees, colleagues and other supportive bodies. Interestingly, such conversations can help to stay connected to the purpose statement. With these conversations, we engaged with the broader system and explored openings for regenerative forms of designing the course. The transgressive aspirations of our course extended beyond the experience we aimed to generate with our students in the (online) classroom setting, into other nested levels of the system. This paved the way, and financial commitments, for at least some years in a row to expand upon alternative approaches and collaborations.

Our collaborative transnational team set up, exceeded the boundaries of traditional guest lectures and created questions in the university structure in relation to compensation. The usual arrangement for payment is built on the coordinating lecturer doing most lectures with occasional guest lecturers compensated with gift cards. From this, it was obvious that university education is geared towards certain collaborations–and reproducing (hegemonic) knowledge systems. As in our team, non-XX based colleagues become a part of the co-creation from the beginning, we expressed the need to compensate them accordingly. During COVID-19, the university system was more lenient with these collaborations, and consequently, there were opportunities to pay international colleagues a decent amount. However, since then, some of us have experienced how in a context of budget cuts and post-pandemic university life, support for such opportunities have become more limited again.

With regards to the contextual restraints in relation to assessments, we were not (yet?) allowed to offer this course without grades because of existing regulations. Students collectively work on graded group projects called 'education and development scenarios', which students could design based on their learning of Myanmar or Sri Lanka. Our international colleagues provided lectures and personal storytelling, and students were offered opportunities to get advice from these colleagues. At the end of the course, students shared a recording of their final 10-min scenario product (e.g., a recorded presentation, role play, scripted documentary or podcast). These recordings were aimed to remove the stress of live presentations and offer a space to practice presentation skills in students' own time and way. These recordings were (re)viewed by fellow students and the teaching team. Reflections and suggestions were shared in a final lively dialogue, avoiding long presentations online with passive listening. The final part of the grade was made up by students' individual reflection paper. Students gather reflections throughout the course

following structured reflection questions (similar to this article's questions but geared to students' learning) and they were invited to reflect on the potential of (transformative) education in international development. In all the assessments, students included a grade suggestion. The graders (Amsterdam-based lecturers) took the suggestions by both students and non-Amsterdam based colleagues into account and engaged with the grade as a conversation instead of a one-sided decisive process (for example, see [49]. We realise these are small, yet important, steps to counter the typically hierarchical process of grading and develop in students their capacity to honestly assess their own and their group's output [47].

3.3. Design Premise 3 Holistic Developmental Learning: Being-Education

In this third section of our analysis, we test the design premise that holistic developmental education nourishes consciousness, reflexivity, and care for the wellbeing of oneself, the broader learning community and entangled (eco)systems. Below, the outcomes of our coding and analysis are structured into two sections, respectively on the courage it takes to walk an alternative route in present day academia which foregrounds consciousness and reflexivity. Secondly, we focus on education design with a focus on wellbeing, for the whole learning community.

3.3.1. Designing Consciousness-Oriented Learning: Courage

The following auto-ethnographic narratives were written in 2020 by the teaching team and illustrate the value of risk-taking and stepping out of one's comfort zone. The coordinating lecturer reflected on the experience of regeneratively designing such courses:

> *"Even though by now we have some experience in designing courses through co-creation at a smaller scale with Master students, it still feels like a leap of faith to walk this path. This time, we not only had to completely redesign the content and set up of the course for a much larger group-we also had to simultaneously shift to a virtual form of teaching. I feel there is added value in the learning process when we encourage students, through co-creation, to take (more) ownership of their own and others learning. The beauty is that the co-creation approach makes the whole teaching/learning experience richer and more enjoyable, also as a lecturer. And yes, it also makes it more chaotic and challenging at times. Especially as there is a need to 'step back' and trust the capabilities of students to step up. This act of stepping back is a continuous practice. It requires me to sincerely care about and create space for my fellow teaching team colleagues, across borders and levels of experience, to find their space to take leaps of faith. My aim, or 'promise beyond ableness', as a course coordinator was thus to open and hold a regenerative learning space for developmental learning for all involved."*

Moving to auto-ethnographic reflections by the junior lecturer in 2020:

> *"I believe that teaching within an online space was a great learning experience. I had to adapt to the different environment, where there are very little social clues that I would usually use to navigate the classroom. It takes a while to get used to speaking into 'a digital void'. I was surprised how it got easier as the time passed, and by week three, it seemed very natural to teach, collaborate and work within digital spaces. While being familiar with my perfectionist tendencies, I believe this course and its setting have helped to loosen me up, acknowledge that making mistakes is part of the process. It also helped me to be open with the students that this new online format is new for us and that we are experimenting with different things as well."*

To complement these perspectives, former student and student assistant wrote:

> *"Being part of this course has been an amazing journey. I believe that we succeeded in not only delivering an interesting course but also incorporating our care for student's*

well-being in the course. The online version brought both advantages, such as the possibility to engage with international colleagues and students that could not physically be in the Netherlands, encouraging new ways of teaching and learning, the exploration of online tools for education; as well as disadvantages such as shorter sessions and less interaction between students. I think the lecturers' way of teaching and interacting with the students, as well as the exercises and moments of reflection incorporated, set this course apart from the rest."

3.3.2. Designing with Care for Student and Educator Well-Being

When the pandemic transformed social spaces in 2020 and 2021, digitalising and atomising social interactions such as learning environments, it highlighted concerns for learners' and educators' well-being. Worries in global health crises were exacerbated for many students by physical and mental isolation. To account for this but also for the pressure many students feel in our results-driven and competitive educational system, well-being was an implicit and explicit theme in the course and our subsequent reflections. By including the teaching teams into our considerations, we gained a holistic understanding of the well-being of the entire learning community. The aim was to create space for reflecting on people's well-being, individual and collective struggles, to stay open and flexible to adjust the classroom to mental and physical concerns. Learners' reflections demonstrated that non-hierarchical and inclusive environments encouraged them to be open about their struggles and to trust that concerns were taken seriously.

One way of achieving this was to create a supportive and welcoming atmosphere. The weekly surveys assisted students to reflect on their well-being. We encouraged students to share reflections and offer opportunities to discuss concerns with the teaching team in a non-judgemental and ungraded manner. Many students reacted positively to the surveys, stating that it helped them to become more aware of their well-being, offering a break from stressful everyday life to explicitly reflect on struggles, stress levels, achievements, and energy levels. Some students reported that they incorporated the surveys into their private journaling exercises as an additional resource for self-reflection. In challenging the speed of academia [50], we designed the check-in surveys as a conscious practice to pause and integrate care within our course. As a teaching team, it created a weekly moment of check-in and increased connection to what students were experiencing in the course and otherwise things that impacted learning. Recognising, and expressing to students, that as a teaching team we do our best to accommodate them and the course, we also reminded students of available support mechanisms: study advisors, buddy systems, university doctors, and psychologists.

Another theme among student reflections was increased awareness of and communication about well-being during group work and in the classroom. They pointed out that the teaching team's openness and explicit focus on well-being as part of the course design made it easier for them to care for themselves and each other and become aware of individual and collective well-being as contributing factors to learning.

This last point also relates to students' perceptions of their intrinsic motivation and agency, which we supported by nurturing co-creation in their teams and connected reflection exercises. This positively influenced their motivation to participate, be active and engaged in the learning community. We believe this dynamic is particularly important for online learning environments, where physical distance makes it harder to check in with each other and may prevent informal communication about well-being.

Lastly, the teaching team discussed their experiences of teaching during a pandemic and the difficulties of adjusting to online learning spaces with students. Students identified this as contributing to a less hierarchical atmosphere and as a way of alleviating stress and pressure to adapt to online learning spaces. Therefore, we believe that check-in surveys and

open, continuous, and respectful communication about well-being in online and offline learning settings contribute to the community's care for each other and support a more empathetic and adaptive environment. This call is supported by various critical education scholars [29,36,41].

4. Discussion and Concluding Reflections

At the University of Amsterdam, there are structural constraints present which are similarly present in the broader education system. Examples of these are the idea of profit at all costs [51] (p. 1), the challenge for educators to develop out of their comfort zones [52] (pp. 78–79), and challenges educators face when providing students space to break habitual thoughts and behaviours [53] (p. 42). These are shaped by systemic challenges [54] (p. 125) and show how education systems are focused to fit the majority population [55] (pp. 65–66). Courses like ours aim to transgress hierarchical boundaries and engage collaborations which go beyond more traditional university course design. During the pandemic, we experienced more freedom and opportunities to redesign courses, consider alternative pedagogies and collaborations and commit to a structured collective inquiry and learning process as a team.

While our potential-oriented approach features in how we have developed our text above, this does not mean shying away from constructive (self-)critique. There are numerous challenges which present restraints to our purpose-driven, co-creative and developmental learning approach, which the analysis also shows. As the literature on the topic points out: "student group work is hard to monitor and evaluate, co-teaching is time-consuming [. . .]. Time differences and technological difficulties complicate online global collaborations." [56] (p. 29). During the pandemic, it became possible to transgress some of these barriers as most education was happening online, and some people found themselves with more time than normal. The international colleagues played a prevalent and decisive role in adapting the course through co-creating the curriculum as contextually based experts. This collaboration raised important discussions about decolonising the classroom and avoiding outdated practices of teaching about a context without meaningfully engaging with 'on-the-ground' community members who live and work in diverse contexts. This simultaneously illustrates a much-needed shift in International Development Studies to move away from talking *about* rather than co-learning with each other across (imagined and factual) borders. It opens new questions about what it would take to co-create and co-learn from mutuality (and not merely bring more diverse voices into a western-based university).

Finally, working from the regenerative premise to simultaneously engage in inner development and system-oriented work, encouraged us to work on a developmental space for educators and learners to not feel paralysed or angry about a seemingly unmoveable education system, as well as the daunting realities of socio-planetary meta-crises. Rather, we used the context of this university course as a space to pause, reflect, rethink and redo our education differently—starting with(in) ourselves. This change can (in the best case) lead to learners feeling less overwhelmed about the struggles of our time and feeling more capable to act and to educators feeling energised and fulfilled by courses while they simultaneously care for their own and other's well-being. Our intention with finishing this piece with a final reflective intermezzo is to extend this developmental experience to you, the reader, as well.

Post-article intermezzo—developing a promise beyond ableness

Having arrived at this part of our text, as a reader you might already start to smell the stables—when a horse begins to run faster when coming closer to its destiny. Thus, as an exercise of stepping out of our automatic patterns, we invite you to instead of quickly finishing the last part of the text below, to take a brief pause. As a way of closing your

engagement as a reader with our text, we invite you to find your own way into a reflective state of mind/being. For some of us in the team of authors, this means being in silence, taking a walk/run in nature, calling a colleague or friend, or journal writing. Think about what would work for you at this specific moment.

We invite you to take a moment to re-read or review your earlier reflections as you engaged with the Regenerative Education Design (RED) framework (Figure 1) and the set of premises we worked with (Figure 2).

- ♣ Arising from your reflections so far, what **promise beyond your current ableness** can you make towards yourself, in a way that supports your own development, the development of those learners/colleagues around you, and the system(s) you are part of?
- ♣ Can you capture this promise to yourself in one or a few words, or an image—which can help you to self-remember this promise as you navigate the complexities of the world of education?

We would be honoured to hear from you and your experience of engaging with this text. Please feel free to reach out to anyone of us.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

RED	Regenerative Education Design
EID	The Bachelor course "Education and International Development"

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