

Thinking Inside the Box 1973:

A Pedagogical Journey

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An Introduction to Thinking Inside the Box

Thinking Inside the Box, otherwise known as TITB, is a co-curricular project which connects students with Latin American archives. It is also a radical pedagogical concept and an experiment into student-led learning. The goal of TITB is deliberately undefined, lending itself to more innovative free-form thinking as students are supported to shape and transform their learning experiences in any way they decide.

'If in five years' time I didn't recognize [TITB], that would be a really strong outcome' – S2¹

TITB challenges students to take their learning into their own hands and reclaim autonomy over their education. TITB offers an alternative to the institutionalised and hegemonic practices of modern higher education and suggests the benefits of dismantling the traditional hierarchal structure of the teacher/student relationship.

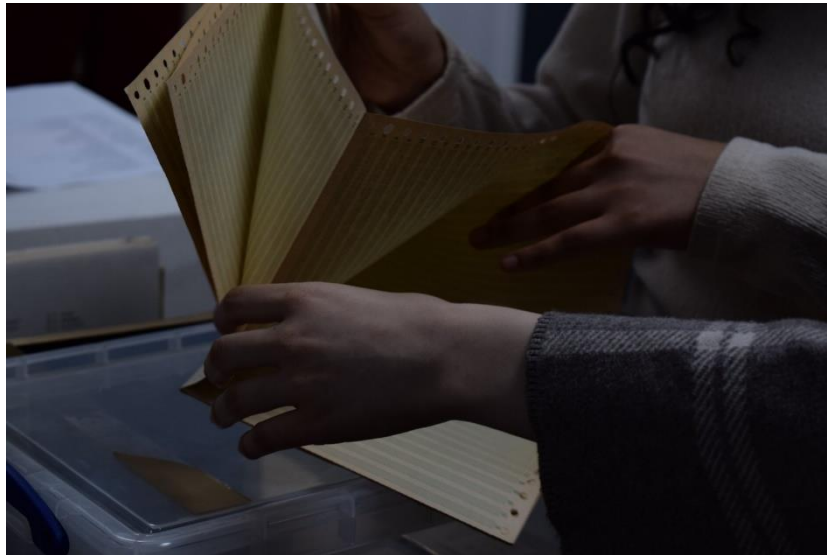


Figure A: Students interacting with the archive. The moment described as TITB's 'genesis' moment.

The first thing Anna, my supervisor, asked me was: "What do you want to do?" She explained to me that I had freedom with my research and where I wanted it to go; I was totally taken aback. Up until this point, my experience of education - the beginning of my academic career - had allowed me next to no autonomy: my GCSEs and A-Levels followed what seemed like an ancient syllabus. All my revision books were handed down to me by my older brother, and before that my cousins had handed them down to him. To hear that I would be able to direct my own learning and decide on the outcomes of my research was such a breath of fresh air.

'I think just picking your own [form of assessment], what you are interested in the most [...], gives enough freedom to someone to actually do what you want to do. What you want to learn more about and also [gives] you the opportunity to do something that you are interested in' – 2A²

¹ Interview with the author, respondent S2

² Interview with Lily Else, respondent 2A

My Laidlaw research project was incredibly unique as I worked with a team of Laidlaw scholars. Alongside Hazel Maris and Lily Else, we evaluated a specific iteration of TITB which took place in Leeds and London between 2022 and 2023. Lily and I focused on interviewing previous participants of TITB, while Hazel explored the continuation of the project.

In many ways, the Laidlaw TITB group almost felt like a new iteration of *Thinking Inside the Box*. Myself and my co-scholars were all given autonomy and freedom in the role we would play in the broader research agenda, which allowed for a sense of individual and collective ownership in the project. I believe this led us all to more deeply invest in our research and ultimately allowed us to take in more from the experience than if our research had all been predefined.

Initially, I think myself and my co-scholars were a bit apprehensive of this freedom and we stuck relatively close to the proposal, which was to conduct interviews of those involved in TITB. My colleague Lily took on the role of student interviews while I interviewed members of staff. Hazel, another colleague, managed stakeholder interviews, but also decided to focus more specifically on the concept of decolonising archives through international fieldwork. My first real test was prepare for conducting interviews. I undertook research into methodological design, learning the pros and cons of different forms of questioning before designing my own. What I didn't expect was that once the interviews started, my research began to take on a life of its own.

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Getting down to business

The interviews ran for a period of four weeks, with nine interviews in total. In preparation for the interviews, I had to complete several tasks. I had to reach out to the staff members and organise a time for their interviews, making sure I sent a list of available days and times to fit around their schedules. I realised the importance of the Outlook calendar when scheduling each of these in. I also had to put together a consent form to send the participants to ensure that I would be able to record the meeting (which would be necessary for transcription later down the line) and ensure we would be able to quote their anonymised answers. The consent form was sent with a detailed description of the project, so that participants were well informed about the purpose of the interview and how their answers would be used. Overall, this taught me about rigorous ethical research procedures.

School of Politics and International Studies		UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS	
Consent to take part in Thinking Inside the Box 1973 Interviews		Add your initials next to the statement if you agree	
<p>The aim of this interview is to understand your experience with Thinking Inside the Box 1973. Learning about your experience and impressions of its outcome is crucial to the continuation of this project. These discussions will be transcribed at a later date and may help inform a piece of literature on the project.</p>			
I confirm that as a stakeholder of <i>Thinking Inside the Box: 1973</i> , I am fully aware of the project's aims and objectives, including the intention to reflect on my thoughts			
I understand that this consent form concerns the recording of an interview which will be transcribed at a later date			
I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw my consent to being recorded at any time without giving any reason and without there being any negative consequences. However, I understand that it may not be possible to withdraw my interview contributions once anonymised extracts of the materials have already been published. In addition, should I not wish to answer any particular question or questions, I am free to decline to do so.			
Any requests to withdraw from one or more interviews should be communicated with the lead researcher immediately: a.gumadi@leeds.ac.uk / +447847068098			
I understand that although the main focus of the interview will be my experience, participation, and impressions on the outcome of the project. The interviews will be open ended and as such could touch upon a number of different topics, some of which may unknowingly or unintentionally be upsetting or triggering. I understand that the research team explicitly encourages and supports me to stop and remove myself from the interview should any such topics arise.			
I also understand that I am able to request the deletion of any recorded material involving my contributions to one or more interviews, with one limitation in place.			
1. It will not be possible to withdraw my interview contributions once anonymised extracts of the interviews have already been published.			
I understand that only members of the research team will have access to my recorded interview contributions. I understand that my name will not be directly linked with the research materials, and I will not be directly identified in the report or reports that result from the research, with one caveat:			
Given the public-facing nature of the project, and the fact that myself and other participants in the project will regularly be identified to audiences as part of the project's activities, anyone could reasonably connect the anonymised data to the wider group as a whole, even if as an individual I would not be identifiable.			
I understand that the data collected from me will be stored in two ways:			
1. As an audio recording in which my name or personal information which makes me identifiable could potentially appear as part of conversation;			
2. As a written transcription, in which my name would be anonymised and any personal information that makes me easily directly identifiable would be omitted.			
I understand that these will be stored for three years following the date of recording.			
I also understand that transcriptions of the recorded interview materials are intended to be used in evaluations, reports, and published research in an anonymised form.			
I am aware that a Privacy Notice for Research is included at the end of this document for my reference.			
I agree to take part in the above research project and will inform the lead researcher should my contact details or willingness to participate change.			
Name of participant			
Participant's signature			
Date			
Name of lead researcher			
Signature			
Date*			
<p>*To be signed and dated in the presence of the participant. Once this has been signed by all parties the participant should receive a copy of the signed and dated participant consent form, the signed pre-written script information sheet and any other written information provided to the participants. A copy of the signed and dated consent form should be kept with the project's main documents which must be kept in a secure location.</p>			

Figure B: Consent Form Template

I then had to design the interview questions. To do so, I had to think specifically about what insight staff would have and how their answers might best serve our understanding of transformative teaching. I also helped my colleague Lily in designing the parallel questions for students, allowing me to align key themes and complement the questions. I focused on their most memorable experiences, the challenges that came with the project and its longer-term impact. I made the questions open-ended to promote more in-depth and meaningful responses. For both the student and staff questions, we included 8-10 semi-structures prompts as we were hoping for the interviews to last around 30 to 45 minutes with an average of four minutes per question.

For the student interviews, we adopted a unique style based on the concept of 'Friendship as Method' (Tillmann-Healy, 2003) where students would be paired together and prompted to ask each

other questions based on the prompts we provided. This method allowed for a deeper insight into student experiences as it mobilises existing relationships and trust to guide students in their reflections, such as on the skills they acquired and the key moments and challenges they shared, whilst also minimising pressure to respond in a way that they perceive the interviewer expects from them.

With all the preparations complete, we moved on to the interviews themselves.

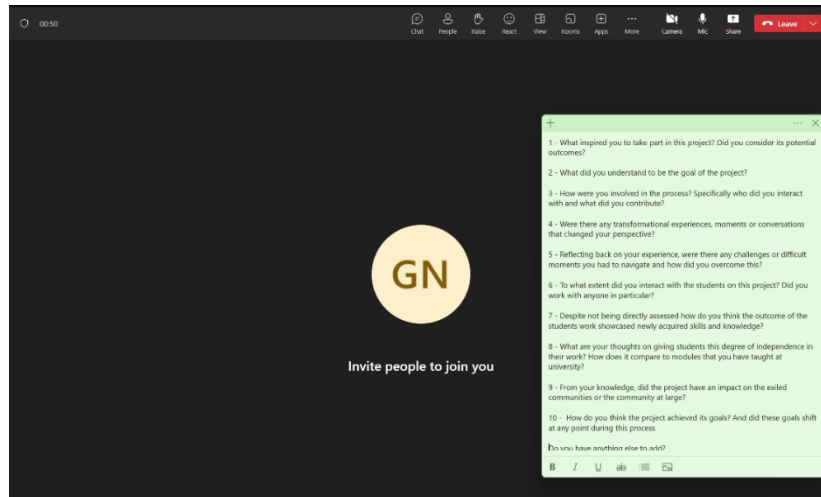


Figure C: Screenshot of the my set-up for the interviews

I started my first interview having planned thoroughly, with my interview questions pasted in the corner of my screen and expecting everything to be smooth sailing. So, of course, it was a disaster. The staff member I was interviewing joined the call and started off by saying that they had not been involved in the project half as much as they wanted to. Unfortunately, the majority on my questions relied on very specific information and experiences of the project and were not relevant to this participant. The questions felt very redundant in this case and I was very aware that I was not getting the most out of this participant. They were clearly very aware of the project, and had fascinating insights, but this was mostly theoretical knowledge rather than experiences of the project. I left the call feeling like I had failed to achieve what I wanted to.

So, I realised I would need to adopt a different interview technique. Something I hadn't fully acknowledged was that staff were involved in the project to varying degrees, and that their perceived involvement would only become apparent to me during the interview itself. Therefore, I decided to adopt a semi-structured interview method where I would have my baseline set of questions but adapt these questions or ask new ones based on their answers, to encourage them to talk about what they were most knowledgeable about and wanted to speak about. This would reflect what they thought was meaningful.

This method demanded more involvement in the interview and it felt more similar to a conversation than an interview. I was having to stay engaged in the conversation and what participants were saying in order to pick out the important information and generate new questions to ask them. At times, I found this particularly challenging because I got so swept up in the interesting things they were saying that I totally lost track of what I was meant to be asking them! In these situations, it was incredibly beneficial to have the set list of questions to refer back to.

Something I also realised in this process was the benefit of building a rapport with the participants. I found that the more I engaged with them, the more meaningful answers they gave. It made an interesting link to 'Friendship as Method' and the benefits of connection in conversation. Overall, my experience helped me to acknowledge the hurdles and limitations that come with working with participants, as well as the skill to be flexible and adapt when needed.

Once I had completed the interviews, the next step was to transcribe them.

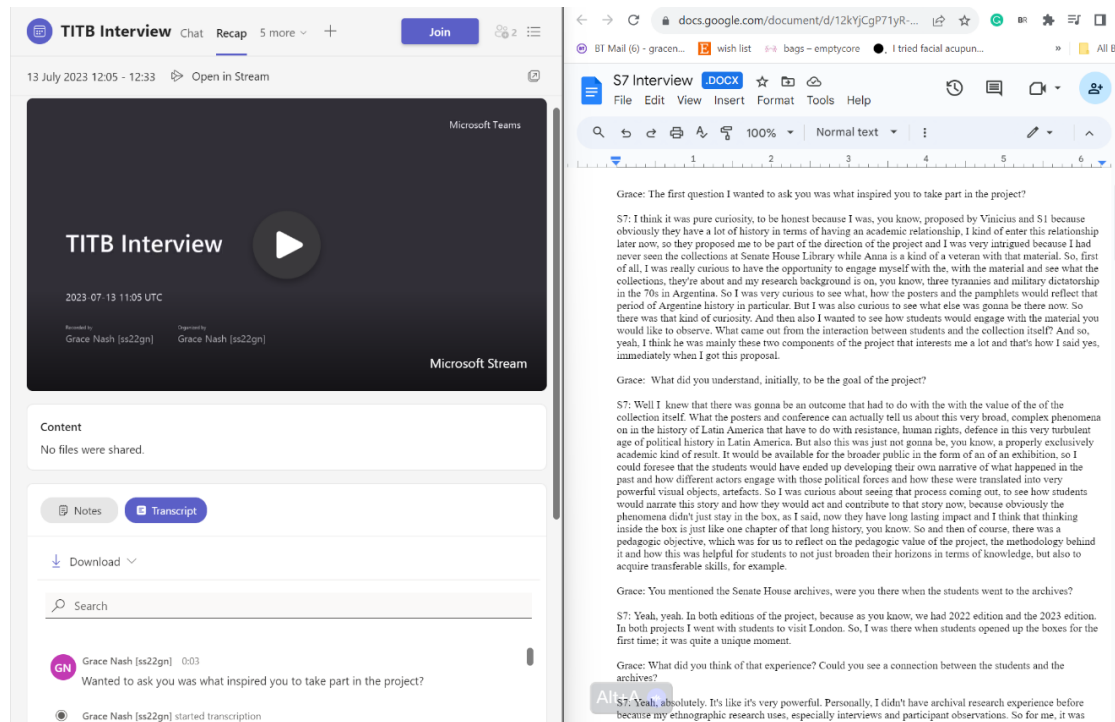


Figure D: Screenshot of my set-up for the transcriptions

At first, I assumed that I would be able to rely on Microsoft Teams' transcription software to carry out my transcriptions, but I soon realised that I would need to take a different approach. While it had transcribed the majority of interviews fairly well, the text was riddled with grammatical errors and when either the participant or I would talk back and forth to each other, it would make a lot of mistakes. So, I ended up having to essentially 'translate' the audio into writing the whole way through. I did this in order to give a fair and accurate representation of what the participant was saying. It seemed not only disrespectful to not give them this effort, but could also potentially lead to an issue if their words were misunderstood.

Figure displays my set-up for the transcriptions. I would play the video, often stopping, starting and replaying it, while looking over the transcription in order to translate it into a word document.

“There is no I in essay”

Personally, a very transformative moment came when reflecting on the interviews and reading the student interview transcriptions carried out by my team member. I was pleasantly surprised when reading over their interviews, as it allowed me to understand how much autonomy they had in making their own decisions while taking part in TITB. Something I identified with was the students reflecting on their own independent critical analysis. The frequent use of ‘I’ and other personal determinators seemed particularly liberating as students clearly valued their own judgement and recognised their agency in the broader project.

‘I came to the conclusion that...’ – 2B³

It made me reflect on a moment in an English lesson in secondary school, when my teacher stated that we should “under no circumstance use ‘I’ in an essay”. She went on to explain that none of us were experts and therefore we should not be exerting our opinions in our essays; rather we should refer to analysis made by ‘professionals’.

This seems to be a common issue faced by students, where traditional etiquette and expectations passed onto us by our academic superiors can make us feel inferior. It generates an atmosphere in which students’ curiosity is dampened by feelings of insecurity in their work, leading to an over-reliance on teachers and ‘experts’. In my view, this leads student to depend on other people’s analysis, preventing them from developing their own critical thinking skills. Paolo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968) provides the basis for this school of thought from a decolonial perspective and resonated clearly in this instance.

Paolo Freire’s seminal text, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, explores how students and educators exist on a spectrum of oppressor and oppressed. In the context of the modern education system, students would be considered ‘oppressed’, as educators treat them as passive recipients of information, therefore denying students autonomy over their learning experiences. Due to this lack of active participation, critical thinking is discouraged. This hierarchical structure leads to students internalising inferiority and leads to an unhealthy power dynamic where students don’t question the authority of what they are being taught.

bell hooks explores the harm of this power dynamic through the idea of ‘talking back’⁴ (hooks, 1986). In her reflections of school, whenever someone would ‘talk back’ to the teacher, it would be treated as an offence, as if it was a crime for a student to oppose dominant ‘knowledge’. In reality, this questioning of authority should be encouraged. We have to ask ourselves how we are supposed to expect people to stand up against structural injustice when we treat authority figures and their knowledge as untouchable and intrinsically superior. This hierarchal structure comes from a long history of imperial forces who would enforce control by establishing themselves as untouchable forces of authority.

³ Interview with Lily Else, respondent 2B

⁴ hooks, bell. 1989. *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*

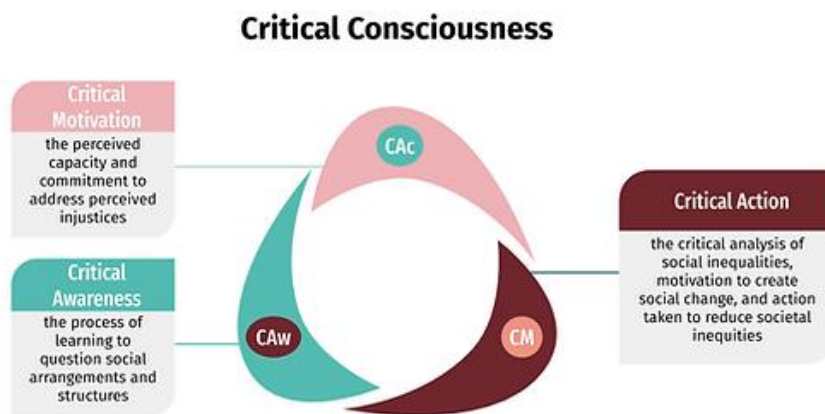


Figure E: Critical Consciousness Diagram⁵

As a pedagogical framework, *Thinking Inside the Box* not only allows students to reclaim their autonomy but it also promotes critical consciousness. Critical consciousness, in the work of Paulo Freire, refers to the ability to engage in reflective and critical thinking about the world, society, and one's own experiences. It involves questioning and analysing social and political systems, power dynamics, and the structural inequalities that exist in society, in order to be able to intervene in situations of oppression.

TITB encourages students to develop critical consciousness by allowing them to take control of their learning and foster critical thinking skills due to the absence of a figure of authority prompting and 'leading' them. Students are also encouraged to explore what they want to research or create which allows them to approach the project as individuals rather than a collective of students. This encourages a deeper understanding of the events they are learning about when they can identify with and relate them to their own lives.

'I felt like I gave it my interpretation, my meaning of things and like I also related to my experiences or my country's experiences with the dictatorship' – 8A⁶

Connecting the History

I wouldn't be able to talk about *Thinking Inside the Box* without mentioning archives. Although the subject matter of this pedagogical approach in theory does not matter, it considers students' encounter with archives – voices of the past – a crucial dimension of its process. The moment the students connected with the archives was described as TITB's 'genesis moment'⁷ and although it constituted only a fraction of the overall project, it was the most frequently cited moment when students were discussed the concept of 'transformative experiences'.

Many of the students stated in the interviews that they had never been to an archive before or even engaged with primary sources. TITB's trip to archives in London and Liverpool was for most the first

⁵ Purpose Labs. 2023. *What is Critical Consciousness?* Available from: <https://www.purposelabs.org/critical-consciousness>

⁶ Interview with Hazel Maris, respondent 8A

⁷ Interview with the author, respondent S1

time students had connected with these kinds of materials. The archives mostly consisted of traces of resistance to dictatorship in Cold War Latin America, including music, posters, pamphlets and other political ephemera.

'You have no idea what's in that box, and you're going through, and then suddenly you've got a notepad and a pen next to you and you're making ideas because suddenly you're thinking about months in the future and what you wanna do with this specific thing' – 4A⁸

When reading back through the transcriptions, it was clear how important this moment was for the students. Many mentioned being excited about the history in a way they hadn't before as they were engaged by the real, authentic nature of these resources.

'you're dealing with the materials first hand and it almost makes you feel like in a way you're there'- 3A⁹

Eventually, students put together an exhibition of images and songs based on their exploration of the archives. But the experience of interacting with primary sources also sparked a deeper level of critical consciousness in the students, as they were able to contextualise the history and see it from a different perspective. My co-scholar Hazel's experience at an archive further exemplifies this. During her research project in Portugal, she discovered that there was very little archival evidence of a particular colonial event. She speculated that this may have been in order to erase ties to Portugal's colonial history. This demonstrated her critical thinking as her independent research led to her exploring an alternative perspective of what she was presented with. It demonstrated how, by taking a 'Thinking Inside the Box' approach, she was critical enough to discover something totally innovative and independent from the presented 'truth'.



Figure F: Antonio Kadima, director of the archive, Tallersol

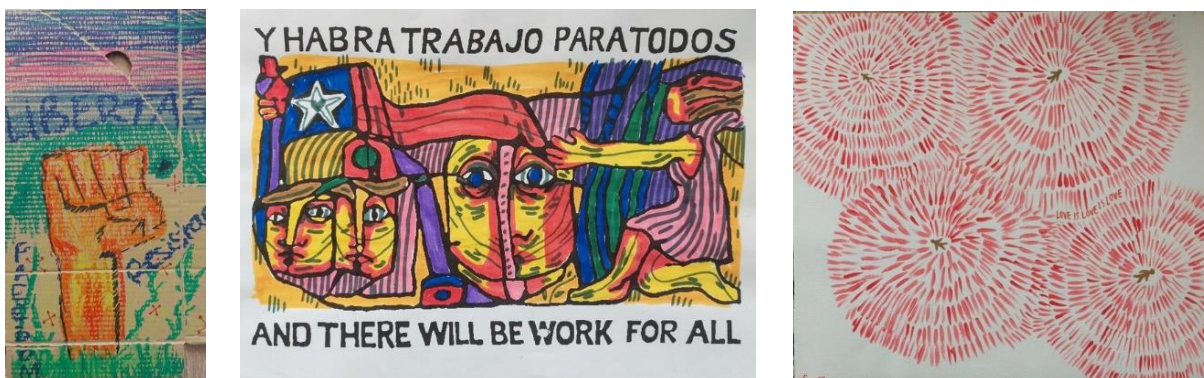
Thinking Inside the Box also connected students to Latin American communities and people that lived and fought under dictatorships.

⁸ Interview with Lily Else, respondent 4A

⁹ Interview with Lily Else, respondent 3A

'It's very humanising. Sometimes history can be filtered through many different people and excludes a lot of content from what originally happened. So you're looking at it from quite like the detached point of view' – 3B¹⁰

A significant connection made through the project was with Antonio Kadima, a Chilean artist and activist who resisted the dictatorship of General Augusto Pinochet through the creation of Tallersol, a cultural centre and now archive. During the regime, Kadima created political posters and displayed them across the capital, Santiago, as a form of resistance to military censorship and control of the media. The students were able to hear about Kadima's first-hand experience and from this they were prompted to think about how they would get a message out today if they had no access to social media and were limited in the language they could use. This inspired them to organise a series of political poster-making workshops for the general public, where they would guide participants in creating their own resistance posters, drawing on the aesthetics of Latin American resistance posters. While the students could have simply displayed Kadima's posters in their exhibition (which they also did), the decision to run parallel workshops allowed members of the public to engage with the materials on a personal level. One member of staff stated that the pieces produced at these workshops 'became the exhibition'¹¹.



Figures G: Posters produced in the TITB workshop

'that shared learning, that shared creation [this] was for me the most joyous part, rather than, you know, the final piece at the end' – 4A¹²

The quote above explores how this student found the workshop far more fulfilling than the formal exhibition they put on. They found it far more meaningful and transformative not only for themselves, but also for the other people learning from it. While the exhibition, workshops and multiple other outputs were not assessed in the traditional sense, what comes to mind is the concept of 'authentic assessment', which considers the importance of students being able to develop distinct skills and knowledge with real-world impact and meaning, whatever that might be. The feedback to TITB identifies the limitations of using only traditional, pre-proposed assessments. As TITB's participants had control over the outcome of their work, they had more ownership, and therefore found it more fulfilling and felt more connected to the material. Many students reflected that they wouldn't have enjoyed the project as much if it had been graded as part of a formal module.

¹⁰ Interview with Lily Else, respondent 3B

¹¹ Interview with the author, respondent S3

¹² Interview with Lily Else, respondent 4A

Next steps

In incredibly exciting news, the Laidlaw TITB group are going to be presenting their findings and experiences at the Student Success in Taught Student Education Conference 2023. With the help of our supervisor, Anna, we drafted a 250-word abstract of our research and were accepted onto the panel of speakers. I am extremely excited about this opportunity, and am so grateful to the Laidlaw Scholarship Program for providing this opportunity. Never in my life would I have dreamt about presenting at a conference like this. It has given me so much confidence in myself and has inspired me to be more ambitious in the future.

By researching *Thinking Inside the Box*, I have a newfound understanding of my education and feel empowered to seek out better opportunities and recognise when my educators fall short of providing me with transformative experiences. My research into pedagogical concepts has also allowed myself to deepen my critical consciousness, teaching me how to mobilise my personal experience and empowering me to generate my own knowledge.

Moreover, from the Laidlaw residentials and working within my group, I have become more aware of my strength in leadership. I recognise that my strongest asset is my ability to make and sustain good working relationships. I believe this is paramount in ensuring the success of a project as a healthy working environment produces the best and most authentically collaborative work.

To conclude, this research project has totally changed my perspective on both myself as well as the world around me and I am incredibly excited to continue on my Laidlaw journey!

Supervisors Comments

As part of a four-person team (myself and two other Laidlaw Scholars), Grace conducted and analysed a series of interviews to evaluate the effectiveness of a pedagogical framework titled Thinking Inside the Box. Grace has shown herself to be a dedicated and crucial member of the team through her contributions to the overall project management, as well as by taking initiative in the project's development. Grace stands out as an extremely thoughtful individual who is driven by her passion for a project – in this case, she immersed herself in the deeper philosophical questions surrounding the decolonisation of education and has allowed herself to develop a nuanced lens through which to interpret the project and her wider surroundings. She also sought funding opportunities for the project's longer term sustainability. Feedback from her interviewees has highlighted her kindness and gentle manner, as well as her sharp intellectual observations, both of which are impressive for someone at Grace's early career stage. Based on these observations, I would say Grace's leadership strengths lie in her ability to demonstrate and encourage empathy, actively listen, generate close and meaningful working relationships and overall contribute to a harmonious and effective working environment. It has been an honour and a privilege to work with her!

Signature of Scholar:  - Date: 29th September 2023

Signature of Project Leader:  Date: 29th September 2023