observe

act

A SPACE FOR
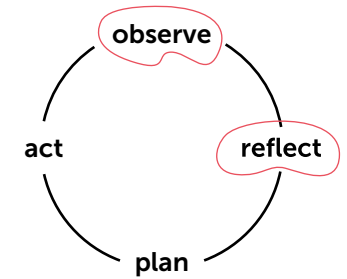FRIENDSHIPS

reflect

plan

Sandra Đukić

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Original Context / Background

I have been a UAL lecturer for three Academic years now, teaching predominantly on the BA Graphic Branding and Identity course, three days a week. The course is attended by up to 60 students per year, with increasing numbers of international students.

The first year (21/22) of teaching we experienced a hybrid model of delivering due to government lockdowns, which unprecedently influenced models of behaviour inside the classroom and amongst students – 'luckily' for that cohort, they were Year 2, so in the following year (22/23) when we resumed normalcy, I particularly focused on, when delivering or designing lectures, to try to create a sense of ownership of the classroom and create some more firm student bonds before they graduate.

Last year (23/24) I taught all three years, which gave me an insightful overview of how the classroom is being used and what student communication and relationships look like now.

Rationale for selecting the topic
## 'A Space for Friendships'
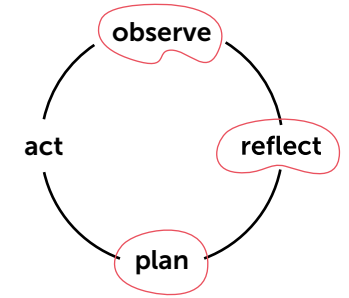
The BA GBI classroom since 23/24 is a dedicated space for the course, where lectures are held Monday to Friday from 10 a.m. until 5 p.m., but the space is available and free to use until 9 p.m.

Primary research methods like observation and conversations with other BA GBI staff members lead me to think there is a need of spatial rethinking, igniting further my intutive belief there isn't enough sense of belonging and much use of the space in the 'free timezone' between 5 and 9 p.m.

I have started by positioning myself as the 'Ignorant schoolmaster'[1] and pretend I do not understand the issue by conducting a written survey "getting rid of received images"[2] in my head of what the place or relationships should look like.

Reflection on research methods used

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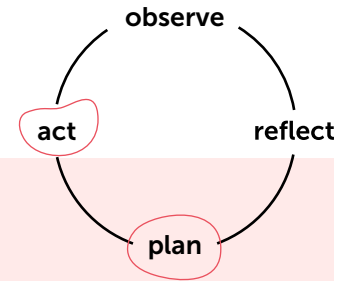
SURVEY & INTERVENTION (primary research method)

Date of Survey: 4-8th Dec 2023
Total number of students: 80
(Year 1: 19 / Year 2: 28 / Year 3: 32 + Year 4 (study abroad): 1)
Sample taken: 15
(Year 1: 5 / Year 2: 5 / Year 3: 5)

Following an approved ethics form and feedback from Mallika (tutor) to make it more of a quantitative survey for an easier analysis, I still decided to apply the Thematic Analysis method (Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke[3]) looking at qualitative data that share a focus on developing themes (patterns of meaning) – it is subjective process, a co-production on the part of the researcher, data/participants and context, and co-production is one of the main aims of a possible intervention in space (redesigning the classroom).

Classroom: W318c (LCC, Workshop Block, Floor 3)
Course: BA Graphic Branding and Identity

Year:

1. Do you feel this is 'your' classroom? Do you feel a sense of belonging to your GBI course, or UAL here?

   Please try to describe.

2. What activities do you do in the classroom?

   1 2 3 4 5   Watch/listen to presentations
   1 2 3 4 5   Research on your computer
   1 2 3 4 5   Chat with friends
   1 2 3 4 5   Design digitally
   1 2 3 4 5   Design analogue
   1 2 3 4 5   Make prototypes
   1 2 3 4 5   Any other category:

3. Do you ever stay on weekdays from 18 – 21h when the room is free for independent work? If yes, in what ways do you use the space?

4. Have you ever used the classroom to:
   a) Organise a workshop
   b) Paint a mural
   c) Bring a plant in to take care of
   d) Dance in the studio
   e) Deliberately put work up on the wall that you are proud of (poster, flyer, object)
   f) Any other way of expressing your sense of belonging to the classroom

   Why would/wouldn't you do it? (please try to be descriptive and honest)

5. Propose a first step to make this classroom space feel more like a place you would like to spend time in both during your scheduled classes and during independent use (feel free to draw as well as write):

Reflection on research methods used

observe
act — reflect
plan

Q1. qualitative (recurring themes)
Do you feel this is 'your' classroom? Do you feel a sense of belonging to your GBI course, or UAL here?
Please try to describe.

Total responses: 80/80 students
POSITIVES:
space > classes in the same room / work-in-progress on walls / books / plants / freedom to change places / collaborative desks
feelings > sense of community / friendly peers&staff / good network, studying experience, routine / warmth
NEGATIVES:
space > no personal storage / colourless / not enough art, branding, inspirational imagery / sharing with other classes / bad sofas / not enough sockets / more social activities
feelings > not for after class / no habit of coming in / met some people but do not belong / gap year student adjustment

Conclusion: paint room, put more visual imagery on walls, investigate possibility of personal storage, organise more social activities

Q2. quantitative
What activities do you do in the classroom?

1 2 3 4 5   Watch/listen to presentations
1 2 3 4 5   Research on your computer
1 2 3 4 5   Chat with friends
1 2 3 4 5   Design digitally
1 2 3 4 5   Design analogue
1 2 3 4 5   Make prototypes
1 2 3 4 5   Any other category:

Total responses: 15/15 students
Watch/listen to presentations: 5 (13), 4 (1), 2 (1)
Research on your computer: 5 (7), 4 (6), 2 (1)
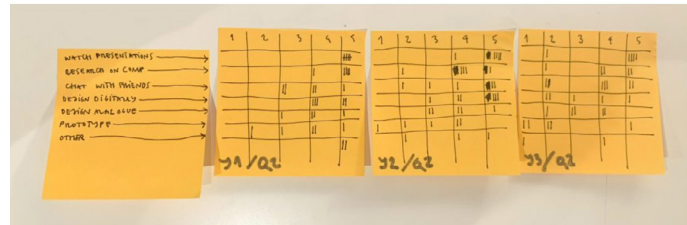Chat with friends: 5 (5), 4 (6), 3 (3), 2(1)
Design digitally: 5 (6), 4 (6), 3 (2), 2 (2)
Design analogue: 5 (2), 4 (6), 3 (5), 2 (1)
Make prototypes: 5 (2), 4 (4), 3 (2), 2 (4), 1 (3)
Any other category: 5 (2), 4 (2), 2 (1), 1 (1)

Conclusion: very low prototype-making, designing digitally lower than expected, chat with friends poor

Q3. quantitative & qualitative (recurring themes)
Do you ever stay on weekdays from 18 – 21h when the room is free for independent work?
If yes, in what ways do you use the space?

Total responses: 14/15 students
YES: **3**
(going deeper into research / analogue work / it is the only "open access space")
NO: **11**
(live too far / go to library instead / another class occupying the space)

Conclusion: promote the open access element ~ beat the library, analogue experimentation
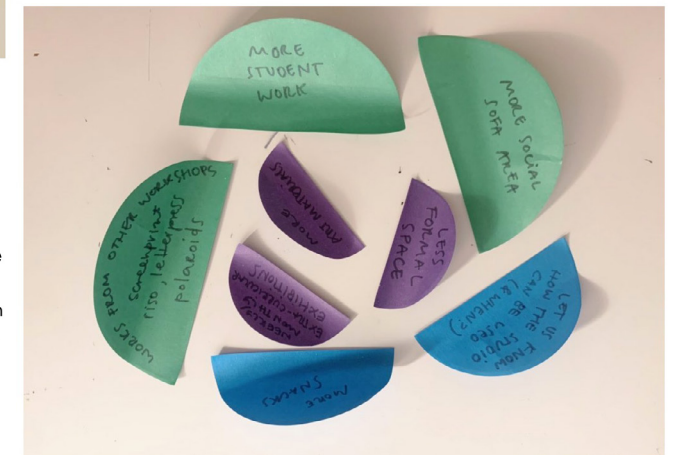
Q5. qualitative (recurring themes)
Propose a first step to make this classroom space feel more like a place you would like to spend time in both during your scheduled classes and during independent use (feel free to draw as well as write):
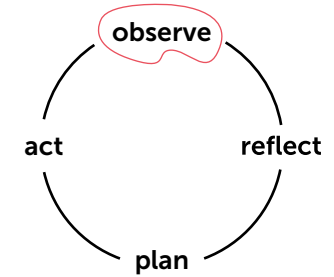
Total responses: 11/15 students
more student work / a more social sofa area / works from other workshops (screen-prints, riso prints, letterpress, polaroids) / weekly-monthly extracurricular exhibitions / more art materials on disposal / more snacks / clear instructions how and when the studio can be used

Conclusion: prepare a programme for September 2024

Q4. quantitative & qualitative (recurring themes)
Have you ever used the classroom to:

a. Organise a workshop
b. Paint a mural
c. Bring a plant in to take care of
d. Dance in the studio
e. Deliberately put work up on the wall that you are proud of (poster, flyer, object)
f. Any other way of expressing your sense of belonging to the classroom
Why would/wouldn't you do it? (please try to be descriptive and honest)

Total responses: 15/15 students
a. Organise a workshop: YES (**5**)
c. Bring a plant: YES (**3**)
e. Put work on the wall: YES (**2**)

WOULD: put things on wall / stay to easily get feedback from peers who also stay / create temporary mood-boards every month / didn't know b, d, e, f can happen in the studio / have better concentration in the studio
WOULDN'T: prefer the library with more facilities / limited time / don't know how freely I can use the space / like to stay at home ~ too far from home / feels 'rigid' / no space to dance & don't like dancing

Conclusion: design, brand & promote the use of space with some clear rules, but also inspirational encouragement.

Reflection on research methods used

observe
reflect
act
plan

TELEVISION SERIES (secondary research method)

"Redesigning the Classroom" (Teachers TV/UK Department of Education)[4]

The episode shows the transformation of a Year 2 classroom at Four Acres Primary School in Bristol with the aim to improve the school environment. Rearranging the position of the focal point – whiteboard on a different wall, room dividers to separate the teaching are from the entrance, painting a mural with students' input as inspirational ideas that could be used for the GBI classroom.

The regard of the learning environment is a message that is being given about the value of education.

"Creating a Space to Let Off Steam" (Teachers TV/UK Department of Education)[5]

From a really cluttered classroom to a really tranquil space – a zoned room with space to reflect using carefully chosen colours (green) and interactive objects (wheel of emotions), versatile storage made from recycled materials.

"Schools need to think about how they use the communal spaces and where they place them. Should you have a separate dining hall and pee and assembly point? Should you have them together? How will it work in your school? Architects really need to think and help schools to prioritize those issues as they design for the future."

Reflection on research methods used
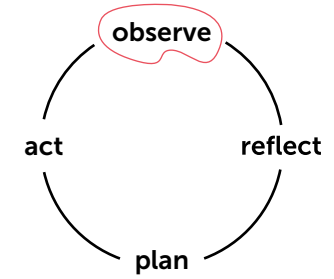
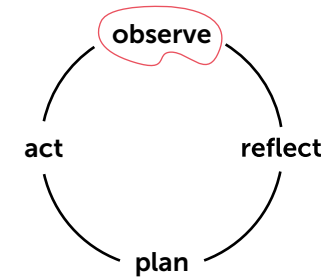## PODCAST (secondary research method)

"Promoting Critical Intercultural Dialogue: a language studies perspective"[6]

Victoria Odeniyi and Paola Giorgis in conversation for UAL Decolonising Arts Institute talk about cultural Identity – race and ethnicity and the ways they intersect with other identities such as language, gender, sexuality, socio-economic background, nationality and so forth - that culture is more than langage; and even though the multilingual student is in advantage because of their ability to understand and read in different contexts, but because of the English dominance, there are no resources for other languages to be applied in studying.

In an ideal classroom – we need to understand who we are before understanding the other. We need to see diversity, rather than just celebrate the idea of diversity.

Reflection on research methods used

BOOK (secondary research method)

### "Engaged Pedagogy (Teaching to Transgress)"[7]

Bell Hooks shares his experiences of being taught, being a teacher, and encounters with Paulo Freire - a significant educator and philosopher, the leading advocate of critical pedagogy.
Hooks believes that "**professors who embrace the challenge of self-actualization will be better able to create pedagogical practices that engage students, providing them with ways of knowing that enhance their capacity to live fully and deeply**"[8]. He also quotes Thich Nhat Hanh who 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**"[9].

He reflects on what the students actually crave from teachers "I have witnessed a grave sense of **dis-ease among professors** (irrespective of their politics) when **students want us to see them as whole** human beings with complex lives and experiences rather than simply as seekers after compartmentalized bits of knowledge."[10] + "I walk into classrooms overflowing with students who feel terribly wounded in their psyches (many of them see therapists), yet I do not think that they want therapy from me. **They do want an education that is healing to the uninformed, unknowing spirit.** They do want knowledge that is meaningful. They rightfully expect that my colleagues and I will **not offer them information without addressing the connection between what they are learning and their overall life experiences**."[11] "**Bourgeois educational structures** seemed to denigrate notions of wholeness and **uphold the idea of a mind/body split**"[12]

Reflecting on space, Hooks concludes that "**any classroom that employs a holistic model of learning will also be a place where teachers grow, and are empowered by the process**".[13]

Reflection on research methods used

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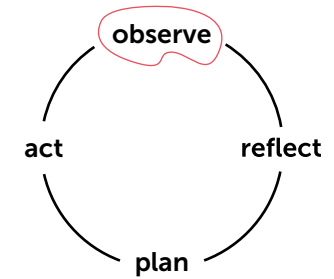
PODCAST (secondary research method)

'Have we lost the skill of making friends?'[14]
Reflection on the podcast Diary with a CEO with guest Simon Sinek

Simon Sinek is an ethnographer, motivation speaker, communications expert often quoted in design thinking workshops – his questioning of 'WHY' something is being done, is what often motivates students to dig deeper into their projects. In this podcast, his speaks about FRIENDSHIP.

With an increase of mental health awareness and diagnosis amongst the UAL BA students I have been teaching in the past three years, were we also had a 'Covid' generation graduating, I feel much is lost with the rise of technology and its 'safety bubble'.

The conversation between Simon and the host leads us to discover the biggest 'bio-hack' to mental health ~ friendship. Friendships lead us to better coping mechanisms and even longevity. He gives the example of the US Marines (army forces) that bond in gruesome war circumstances, leaning on each other, sharing, protecting and never leaving anyone behind. Even though this is somewhat of an extreme shared experience, it is certainly shared experience that students go through during their studentship and in the classroom.

This was a big milestone in my thinking process about the goal of my Action Research Project, where maybe it is essential to focus on bonds primarily rather than space. It made me think about the question, how can we as an institution encourage friendship in and beyond the classroom for a better life and student experience.

THE A-HA moment !

It is not about the space itself, it is about one thing that cannot be forced or monetised – Friendship.
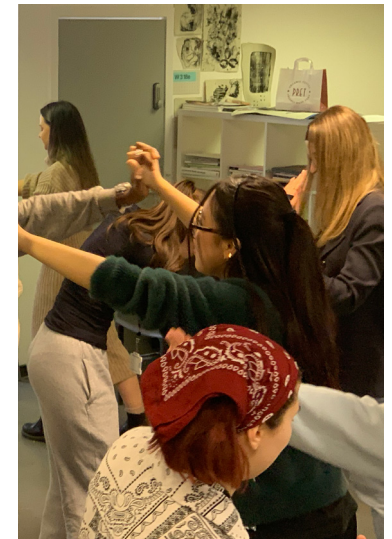
Reflection on research methods used
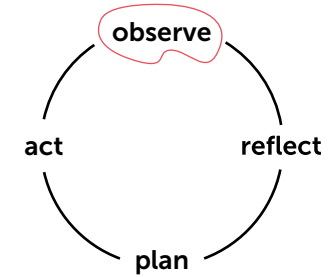
CORPUS RESEARCH (primary research method)

'Giving & Receiving – the Core of Friendship'
Reflection on a Communication Workshop I organised with the actor and theatre director, Alexander J. Gifford, with then Year 3 students on 7th March 2023

Although the initial task of the workshop was to introduce the students with the Learning Outcome "Communication", I decided to come from a 'rear' angle and focus on different ways of communication – from oral to physical. Alexander is a spiritual seeker, and that is how I got to know him due to common interests, but besides knowing he is an actor and looking at his CV with communication workshops, I was not sure what to expect.
I participated in a pleasant surprise – the students who spent their first year online (lockdown) and second year (hybrid), had only year three to experience a healthy student environment, so for me it was an insight to bring as many opportunities that evoke connection.
Alexander confidently and quickly opened the space up for movement during introduction, and the quickly established trust helped to proceed with more "demanding" movements such as balancing between two not so familiar peers to test listening to each others bodies and energies. This brought up instant smiles and surely bonding, having gone through a 'shared physical experience'.

Conclusion: reflecting back to this workshop brought another big milestone in my research which is including embodied practices in my ARP proposal.

# Reflection on research methods used

CORPUS RESEARCH (primary research method)

Reflection and proposal ideas on classroom & off-site bonding experiences

Looking at some of workshops, events and excursions I designed or delivered, I have identified "bonding experiences", those that were and can be examples of fertile grounds for forming friendships. I am using this method to identify what has been done already, what needs to be re-enforced or re-invented in the forth-coming academic year when I am to take over a group of Year 2 students where the majority (35 students) come from the same foreign country and the minority (25 students) are a mixed bag.
My observation lead me to believe that ensuring more connection, communication and sharing is necessarily, and I am using this ARP project to identify actions to support my belief in a healthier and more wholesome studentship.
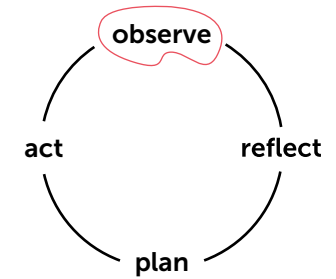
Student Competitions

Exhibition visits

The Writing Retreat

Christmas Party

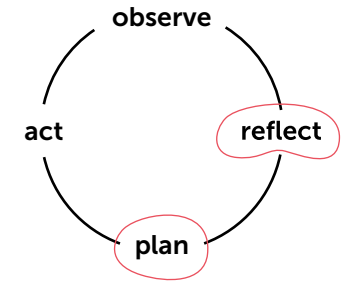The Writing Retreat

Small groups

Industry Practice briefings

Exhibition setups

Summary of findings (space)

SURVEY/INTERVENTION:

Q1 conclusion: paint room, put more visual imagery on walls, investigate possibility of personal storage, organise more social activities

Q2 conclusion: very low prototype-making, designing digitally lower than expected, chat with friends poor

Q3 conclusion: promote the open access element ~ beat the library, analogue experimentation

Q4 conclusion: design, brand & promote the use of space with some clear rules, but also inspirational encouragement
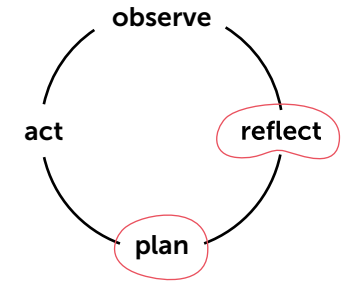
Q5 conclusion: prepare a programme for September 2024

Set of actions:
>> **condense the findings**
>> **share findings with GBI colleagues to see what is feasable**
>> **create a clear strategy for the use of the space**
>> **promote from September 2024**

observe

act   reflect

plan

Summary of findings (delivery)

observe

reflect

act

plan

PROPOSALS:

The Writing Retreat

Although this workshop thematically designed by our team, but spatially designed by me, brings me to the conclusion that beside tasks that will help students hone their personal projects, **I can design tasks that will require the participation of one to two peers additionally.**

The Christmas Party 2023

Organised by the team, initiated by me. **Organise more informal social events (film evenings, drink&draw, zine workshop) and encourage students to use the classroom after class to initiate their own according to their interests. I can get the ball rolling, but allow them to create their own "sports".**

Industry Practice Briefings

These serve as very good bonding experiences, as the groups are relatively small and the students are all focus on a shared brief. **As a tutor, I can definitively encourage more meet-ups or sharing groups after hours students can organise.**

Setting up Exhibitions

Exhibition design and organisation is a "war" with its pinnacle – the installation "the main battlefield". It is usually a time when you realise who you can depend on, and a time when through the physicality of doing things together students bond. **Insight: besides the scheduled exhibitions, instigate Work in Progress or guerilla shows.**

Design Competitions

The students below have self-initiatively entered the D&AD awards and won a pencil! They were not close friends at the beginning of the competition, but identified themselves as the ambitious ones. They certainly became good friends, sharing meals and organising house hang-outs. They were informally supported by willing staff member, **but can we organise internal competitions at GBI maybe mixing year groups so we get higher participation?**

Small groups

Whenever possible, build small groups up to 4 peer maximum, spending additional time to "interfere with destiny" and create groups paying attention to avoid "cliques".

Summary of findings (delivery)
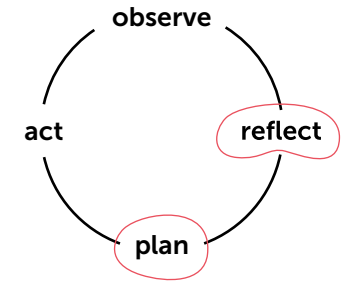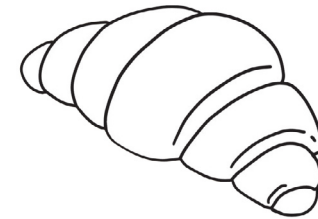
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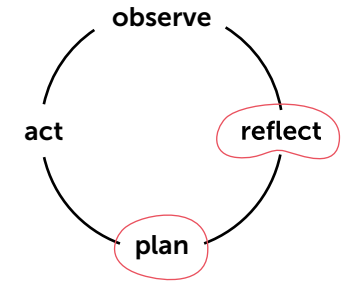
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PROPOSALS:

Guest Lecturers

Even if we are limited with the budget for external guest, **I can investigate and invite staff members who are maybe already doing embodied practices (maybe also music, poetry)**

Outtings

Beside exhibitions, **could we do festivals, factories, print studios, bakeries, shoe shops, banks, lavender fields?**

Summary of findings (UAL)

PROPOSALS:

~ Can there be a wider 'FRIENDSHIP' campaign
across LCC (UAL), starting off micro with BA GBI?
~ Define long-term benefits and rationale of doing it
~ Investigate who the appropriate team would be to
approach
~ Can students design the campaign?
~ Can I get additional funding to work on this
project?

Evaluation

observe

act   reflect

plan

ARP unit presented for me the most challenging unit, as I feel out of my cohort's timeline and lost some of the communal energy one gets when going through a joint experience. This affected my work by not being able to connect, in an extend I would be happy with, with other peers whose feedback I could benefit from. On the other hand, all the individual tutorials with Mallika, Rachel and Lindsay where detrimental to be able to firstly understand how open research can be, secondly they unselfishly shared their ideas, experiences, platforms and references, which induced movement in the process when I felt it stagnated.

A positive outcome of this project is that I discovered internally a truth about what 'bothers' me, and what is missing in today's studentship at LCC (UAL) - and it is the lack of spaces and campaigns that promote non-monetised gatherings and friendships. Yes, money is put into a polished canteen and wireless card cashier and tap-in entry system, but where are the spaces of freedom - as a university, we have the responsibility to lay fundaments for healthier generations and values.

Although ideas kept blossoming, my work could have been defined with more research, more experimentation and more polished actionable outcome (such as for example having a proposal to submit to get further funding to develop a more ubiqutous campaign). Formal academic research is not something I have donebefore much, hence it was not something I could project from past experience and sometimes did not document all the 'informal' research I had done that eventually affected the project.

My final conclusion, about promoting friendship, I feel supports in great extent overcoming differences in social, economic and racial statuses and defies current political agendas of the neoliberal capitalist cage.

Bibliography

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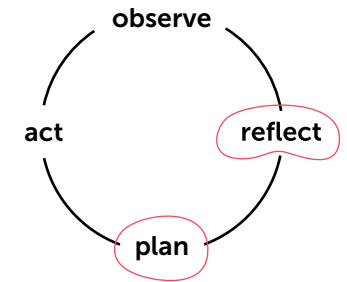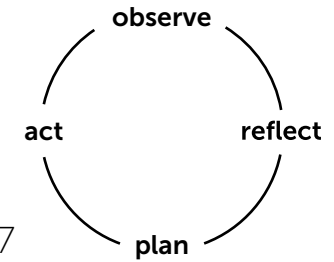
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[Video] Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I3WUiD8HYn8&t=3612s
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