

No Back to Normal: Studio Forward at California College of the Arts

An Interview with Cristina Gaitán and Juan Carlos Rodríguez Rivera¹

*Rachel Berger*²

The unimaginable disruptions of 2020 radically altered our worlds while amplifying our digital connectedness across time and space. Recognizing that there is no “back to normal,” design educators and students are embracing new pedagogical approaches to ensure that the designers of tomorrow are prepared to design into the future. Futures literacy, a skill that builds on the innate human capacity to imagine the future and addresses the problem of poverty-of-the-imagination, is a crucial capability for the next generation of designers.

— *Rachel Berger, US*

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Kate Yang (front) and Morgan Wash (back) installing The Restorative Machine, CCA Hubbell Street Galleries, 2021. Photo by Rachel Berger. The Restorative Machine, created by Studio Forward students Melinda Kreuser, Morgan Wash, and Kate Yang, was a machine, composed of native plants and moss, that guided spectators through a sensorial meditative practice to address climate grief.³

This transcribed interview with Cristina Gaitán and Juan Carlos Rodríguez Rivera, design professors at California College of the Arts (CCA), presents a case study of transformational pedagogy in progress. In Fall 2021, Gaitán and Rodríguez Rivera co-taught the first semester of Studio Forward, a year-long sponsored course bringing together multi-disciplinary teams of graduate and undergraduate design students. The topic for Studio Forward’s inaugural year was the Future of Belonging, and the course was offered in partnership with Google.

Gaitán and Rodríguez Rivera centered their curricular and pedagogical approach on “futures literacy,” a UNESCO-developed competency that “allows people to better understand the role of the future in what they see and do.”⁴ Since 2012, UNESCO’s Global Futures Literacy Network has hosted

3 Rachel Berger, photograph of *The Restorative Machine*, 2021.

4 UNESCO, Futures Literacy, <https://en.unesco.org/futuresliteracy/about>.

Futures Literacy Labs on topics such as climate justice, peace, and wellbeing. According to Gaitán, in Studio Forward, futures literacy was treated as, “a set of skills—conceptual, research, and technical—that one can learn to not just talk about the future but to also design *into* the future, to design new futures.” Studio Forward students practiced futures literacy using design tools to engage in speculation, worldbuilding, and storytelling. Their outputs included artifacts, electronic prototypes, speculative mock-ups, written narratives, videos, interactions, tools, experiences, and environments—whatever they believed it would take to collectively envision (and build) the world they wanted to live in.



Demonstration of augmented reality digital social experience in Food for Thought Café, CCA Hubbell Street Galleries, 2021. Food for Thought Café, created by Studio Forward students Apurva Chinta, Leah Kallen, Valerie Liu, and Krystle Reynolds, was a tangible café table with an overlaid AR experience, critiquing our tendency to let remote relationships distract us from the people in front of us.⁵

5 Cristina Gaitán, photograph of *Food for Thought Café*, 2021.

In their conversation with Rachel Berger, Project Director for Studio Forward, Gaitán and Rodríguez Rivera reflect on their pedagogy and describe how they tried to create the conditions for students to imagine possible futures and create prototypes to inspire change. Over the course of the interview, three themes emerge: the challenge of experimental education in the Covid-impacted classroom, misconceptions about the role of technology in designing futures, and collaboration as a key capability for tomorrow's designer.

In Fall 2021, after more than a year of fully remote instruction, CCA started transitioning back to in-person classes. Initially, Gaitán and Rodríguez Rivera planned to focus the Studio Forward curriculum on belonging as a topic and speculative design and “futuring” as methodologies. To give the students agency, they deliberately left the course unstructured and the assignments open-ended. However, they soon realized they had underestimated Covid's impact on their class. The students needed much more structure than they had before the pandemic. Before they felt ready to experiment, their sense of self and community needed to be rebuilt, and their definition of design needed to be expanded.

Digital technologies are certainly fundamental to designers, but Gaitán and Rodríguez Rivera caution against equating the use of advanced technology with designing futures. Technology is a tool, one of many ways of looking at culture and understanding the larger context for design. The original topic for Studio Forward was the Future of Digital Belonging. Early on, to keep the students from automatically assuming they would be using high-tech applications like augmented reality and the blockchain in their projects, the instructors removed the word “digital” from the topic.

The first semester of Studio Forward became about collaboration above all else—between co-instructors, amongst instructors and students, within student teams, and between a school and a sponsor. Gaitán and Rodríguez Rivera cleared a lot of space in the class to focus on helping the teams learn how to work together successfully. They believed that teaching the students to collaborate would be a more important and enduring skill than any technical training or application they might offer. Their methods included pushing students to develop a shared understanding of the language they were using and the disciplines they were practicing, facilitating feedback conversations with the class, and incorporating reflection rituals to help students articulate what they were doing, making, and learning. Throughout, the instructors held themselves accountable for creating an authentic sense of belonging in a class about the future of belonging.

Interview

Rachel Berger: What is Studio Forward?

Cristina Gaitán: Studio Forward is a multi-disciplinary year-long exploratory studio. It is an incubator around this idea of the future of belonging. For me, it is about students from multiple disciplines coming together and figuring out how to collaborate and learn from each other regarding their different disciplines, practices, processes, tools, and materials.

Juan Carlos Rodriguez Rivera: What I expected Studio Forward would be and what it actually became are really different. At the beginning, there was this whole plan: interdisciplinary students would be experimenting together, exploring all these topics. That was what I thought it would be, and then the reality was that it was about collaboration: with the students, amongst the students, with Cristina, with Google, and with the department. To me, all aspects of the class were about collaborating in different contexts and with different people.

CG: I totally agree. Originally, it was also about this idea of futures literacy, which is a set of skills—conceptual, research, and technical—that one can learn to not just talk about the future but to also design *into* the future, to design new futures. For most of last semester, the students did not seem to respond to that, but we just reconvened for the spring term, and several students brought up futures literacy as the most exciting part of the last semester's work. I was excited to hear that they *did* retain it; they *were* thinking about it. Maybe they just did not know how to talk about it at the end of last semester. So, it is a thread that is still alive in what they are doing.

RB: I am working on a project with middle school students where I asked them to imagine the future, and at least half of them brought up “flying cars.” Somehow, the future still equals flying cars, which I find surprising. How do you see the relationship between futuring and technology? How did you talk about and teach about technology in the course?

JCRR: I get disappointed when “future” means flying cars and advanced technology. To me, futuring and speculative design are less about having

fancy technology and more about creating futures that are not oppressive. For example, how do we design these systems so we do not destroy the planet?

CG: Technology is a tool. In class, we approach it as just one of myriad ways of looking at culture and contextual information around the future, the present, or the past. Throwing the word “technology” around is also a bit ridiculous because people have different understandings of what it is. An early stone tool was a piece of technology.

JCRR: The original topic of the course was “The Future of Digital Belonging,” and last year, I thought, “Oh, that sounds cool!” But “future,” “digital,” and “belonging” are three loaded words. Now, when I look at those three words together, I realize that is a lot to unpack in one semester.

CG: Right. We started by taking the word “digital” out because the students were too distracted by it. They had assumptions about what that meant, where they were going, and what they were supposed to create based on that one word.

We also talked about how technology has a history. What do we mean by that? What is a machine? What is a tool, and what has it been through time? Technology is just one artifact in a larger system, so we tried to deconstruct that for them in different ways and have them think about what they were making in those ways. It is hard to ask people to unlearn that kind of thing.

RB: Can you talk about some of your teaching methods and the exercises you had the students do to try to shake them out of this mindset?

CG: We pushed the students to define the terms in their statements of interest and in the questions they were asking. “This is your group’s statement,” we would say, “but what do each of these things mean? You are assuming you all have the same intention and understanding around this topic, and you probably do not. And even if you do, you have to get used to explaining what you mean to other people who are new to your work and new to your project.”

JCRR: When the students’ proposals included words that were trendy, we asked them to unpack those words in relation to their project and their group. One example was a team that used words like “healing,” “collective,” and “community.” We asked them, “What is the collective? What is a community?”

What is healing, and how does that relate to this idea of belonging?” They would say, “Community means community!” And we would say, “No. What does community actually mean to you?”

CG: This happened a lot with the last project, which was about creating machines. When we told a group, “Go make a machine,” they said, “I do not know what that means.” To expand their understanding, we talked about a machine historically and beyond the context of a tool or a technology. When you Google the definition of “machine,” one of the definitions is a group of people doing a particular thing together. So, we taught them different ways of being conscientious about their language and what it means for them.

JCRR: Another approach we used at the beginning was to ask the students to consider who *they* are in this work. Before we can start speculating about the future in a responsible way, we need to ask, “Who am I in relation to nature, the world, or the classroom? Who am I in relation to all these moments in history and the present?” When I say it, it makes total sense—we started the students with introspection, then human-centered design, and then forecasting methodologies and practices. But in the classroom, it was challenging for the students to understand why we were asking this.

RB: Do you think that is a result of their previous training as designers where they might be discouraged from asking, “Who am I?”

JCRR: Yes, definitely. They were eager to start doing something without going deep into their relationship to what they were doing or its context. They said, “We are going to create a product! About whatever! In the future! Let’s do it!” It is related to designing obsolete objects without thinking about the broader context and histories. This was hard for them to comprehend, and a lot of it was due to the baggage that everyone had.

RB: What other baggage or assumptions did people bring to the class?

CG: We did not anticipate the unlearning moment that was going to have to happen to free the students up to be on the ride with us. Because of the effects of the pandemic, we are all in this weird reality right now, and that was literally affecting the way students came to class, whether they came to class, and what they were open and available to do.

Everyone was a bit in survival mode, and I did not realize that. So, on top of the subject matter and the methodologies we were teaching, we had to think about how to be humans together. Juan and I needed to put a ton of attention into that, but I had no idea. No one had any idea, and that is still an important part of learning and collaborating with each other. It is what the class turned into.

One practical thing I realize now is that I had created a mental model of the student body we had and the different disciplines they were coming from, and that is how I was organizing them thematically in the class. That is the information I was operating on in terms of how we constructed an assignment and what we talked about. That is all important, but for some of the graduate students, it was their first semester in design school. They did not come with a design lexicon or background. They were dipping their toe into what they assumed design was.

This goes back to the question of how to create a community of totally diverse people. How do I create belonging in this class that is talking about the future of belonging? We tried out a lot of different things, and we are still working on that.

JCRR: Most of the assumptions the students came in with had to do with language. Going back to “the future of digital belonging,” students assumed that meant augmented reality and virtual reality, and it was hard to move them away from that. I said, “It is good that you have this strong point of view, but let’s be a little bit more open about this.”

And then, when it comes to instructions, a word like “render” means completely different things for an illustrator, an MFA design student, and an industrial designer. The words we were using came with different assumptions based on each student’s background. That was interesting, and we did not expect it.

RB: What was the partnership with Google like? Did you feel like you had to engage with technology in a particular way?

JCRR:

It was a weird moment to be doing all this during the pandemic. The students were expecting to be at Google, to go to the offices and the campus, but that was not possible. When they did not see it, many students felt disappointed, so we were also working through that disappointment and building something out of it.

CG: The relationship with Google was like an early-stage experimental incubator, where it felt like no one had specific expectations about where we were going. I assumed that Google would want us to be talking about the technological piece. My reaction to that is always, “Yeah, we will get there, but first, we are going to do other things that will allow us to get there in a way that has integrity.” I was ready for pushback, ready to talk about why this was the right way to go, but I never had to.

It is related to what I tell graduate students when they think they need to design screens and apps to get a job. I say, “You need to do what is interesting to you. You need to figure out new ways of exploring and approaching design, and these companies will figure out how to make money off of you because that is what they do.”

JCRR: The people that visited the class from Google echoed that. They said, “Google hired me because of my passion for research, not because I do beautiful UX and screen design.” To me, it was so powerful to hear these people who are working at Google share their journey with the students and explain that all journeys are different and sometimes take you to unexpected places.

You learn a lot from someone telling you their story. There is a lot of knowledge there that you can apply to your own practice and life. If I could go back in time, I would love to explain that to the students more clearly and give them tools so that when someone is telling their journey story, it can feel like more of a knowledge exchange moment for the students.

CG: Early on, the students had an aversion to anecdotal information, even qualitative information, because they perceived it as not facts, not the right or the most important information. If you are really stressed out about what you think you are supposed to be doing, and there is someone coming in and talking about their story, and it doesn't feel like it is helping you get to what you are supposed to be doing, I can imagine some internal freak outs are happening.

RB: Some of the ways Studio Forward has been described sound hard to actualize in the classroom. For example, we say it is an “experimental open-ended course” and “up for questioning everything.” What does this mean to you? Is that about being experimental in how you teach or about encouraging students to make experimental work? So much about traditional teaching is not about open-endedness. It is about definition and structure and making

things more clear. Constant questioning could be destabilizing for a student looking for validation that they are going in the right direction. On the other hand, is stability overrated? Instability can be painful, but it is the reality we live in.

JCRR: It was experimental across many dimensions—in the class, with the assignments, and with Cristina and me, in the way we were designing the curriculum, in our ways of teaching and interacting with the students. That was a challenge, unpacking what experimental means and the value of experimentation. For some, the assumption was that to be experimental is to try three things and be done, which misses the value in the experiments themselves.

This is connected to many designers' obsession with the final form. We saw their desks. Next to what they were presenting to us, they would have everything they were trying out. However, they would not include those things in their presentations because they were only ready to show the final thing. Many students were not comfortable saying, "This is all the process that I am making. I am trying all these things, so let's see where it takes me." They were doing it, but they just were not showing it, which is weird.

The class was open-ended in the sense of how much we were constantly changing it in reaction to what was happening, not only in the classroom but also around us. There were all these evolutions where we had to sit down and rethink why this project is going in this direction, why we should push it in the other direction, and why the students are feeling this way or the other way.

We asked ourselves how to build some structure into this "open-ended" course, not a hierarchical structure but one that is more lateral. That was a challenge, and I do not think we ever got to that point. If a hierarchy is a pyramid, our structure goes like this. [Forms a triangle with his hands, then tips it over.] It is still a pyramid! It never became lateral. We tried things to make that happen, like spending a class meeting doing an aligning exercise with the students and us. We also had meetings just to listen to the students and ask, "What are you feeling? What do you want to see?" We gave space to listen to the students and talk with them about how we move forward with this. Those were specific moments where the open-ended idea became a reality.

CG: Initially, I assumed that the students would be really self-driven within their fields and show up as outspoken advocates of their disciplines. I imagined them coming together in teams and an industrial design student saying, "I love

rendering! I will take these concepts and render them and print them and make them real,” and a graphic design student saying, “I am really into this particular aesthetic, and I am going to make the publication!”

Instead, because this open-ended thing was open in all directions—from the deliverables they had to make to the process they might use to how we related to them in class—there were too many open ends, and it did not allow them the confidence to show up in that way. I also think my assumptions did not account for the difference between undergraduate and graduate students. I can imagine that some of the undergrads felt intimidated. They were rock stars, but they seemed to take a backseat to the louder voices in the room, which happened for the most part to be grad students. That really impacted the conversation in the class, what the groups were making, and how they related to each other.

Maybe this is my survival reaction, but the way that my pendulum swung was to create a little more structure. There needed to be some scaffolding. We did not need to line the entire building, but we needed more than half a wall. That is important because it frees them up to do something. Our colleague Saraleah Fordyce taught our students and us some simple methods for reflection, so we had these little moments, these little stepping stones, even in a super ambiguous space, to pause and think about what we are doing, what we have made, and what we have learned. The students did that for themselves and for each other. It was so important because the students might go, live, do whatever they are going to do for the next year, and then have this moment where they realize, “Oh! That is what we were doing back then.” You can’t always immediately articulate what you are learning and what you are doing. It takes time.

So yes, having some structure is important, but that can look many different ways. You can create structure by having two weeks of “unlearning” where you create a common foundation for all disciplines, or by being super specific about all the deliverables. The structure should always be in service of open-endedness.

JCRR: In general, stability is overrated, but right now, it is really necessary. Last semester, everything was unstable. We were online and then in-person and then online, and then someone got Covid-19, so we went online again. Then there were no printers, and then there was no Internet. The whole world was unstable, and we were proposing this class where we said, “Do whatever you want! The final form can be anything!” And the students said, “Whoa. We need

one thing in this whole equation that is more stable.” It was a good learning experience for me.

RB: I am interested in the tension between what students were learning about what it means to be a designer in their other classes and what you asked of them. In Meredith Davis’s design futures research, she describes the “new mindsets, knowledge, and skills that traditionally trained designers must acquire to transition successfully to the aspects of professional work that are likely to dominate the field in the future.” She continues, “College faculty must be cautious not to overload curricula with content of temporary relevance at the expense of more enduring knowledge that transcends a rapidly changing context.”⁶ Do you agree with her assessment? What are the mindsets, knowledge, and skills that designers should be acquiring?

JCRR: Yes, to both quotes. There were two cores of the Studio Forward class: futures literacy and collaboration. These are things that designers need to learn to transition into professional work, no matter what that means for them. Unfortunately, this was also where a discrepancy happened because students were asking us to teach them tools like VR and AR to give them steps on speculation. However, we did not want to overload the curriculum with technical how-to’s. Trying to balance that was hard, but I believe that to be a good and responsible designer, it is more important for a student to learn collaboration than focusing the entire semester on whatever is trendy right now, such as bitcoins, NFTs, and memes.

CG: First, students need to learn about the ethical dilemmas of design and a designer’s responsibilities. In my education as a designer, I was never directly taught this or made to answer for it. When I teach interaction design, it is in the very first material that we talk about. What are you making and why? What are its implications on other people, places, and animals?

Second, we tried to teach the students that they can use design processes to look at anything in the world, including things that people do not think of when they think of design. We can design and redesign government, for example. Students can use the tools that design teaches them to be more active people in the world, in whatever ways they are interested in.

6 Meredith Davis, “Introduction to Design Futures,” AIGA, 2019, <https://www.aiga.org/aiga-design-futures/introduction-to-design-futures>.

JCRR: One other thing we were trying to do when defining design with them was that design is more than your discipline. Design is a bigger concept. Design is how the world is designed. It was hard for them to get out of the mindset that design for me is graphic design because that is what I do. Design for me is interaction design because that is what I do. I do not think we were able to get them all the way out of that bubble, that design is what my discipline is. That is a little disappointing, but it is real. It is really hard for people to understand that design is all of this!

RB: When you think of the students who were most successful in the class, what mindset did they bring or develop?

CG: I immediately think of two students who ended up collaborating closely. Their mindsets were pretty different, but they worked very well together. One is super multi-disciplinary. He has a background in performance. He came to school without any hard design skills, but he was open to looking at the world, objects, and environments through design. He understands design and that everything is and can be designed. He is also not afraid to take risks. When he gets inspired by something, he keeps following it and playing around with it, and he does not need to know what it is going to be in the end.

The other student really knows what she is passionate about. When I hear her speak about what she did last semester and what she wants to do, it is all about accessibility. She is very dedicated to that topic, and she figures out how to keep plugging along at it mostly through the medium of graphic design. They are both very dedicated to their development and their practice.

JCRR: They were also successful because they were really good at collaborating and negotiating and making decisions together. Another group was successful because their topic was important to all of them. They wanted to work with global warming. We asked, “How do we bring it to a smaller scale? How do we bring it into your passion?” And they were able to figure that out. That group was successful because their shared focus was the topic they chose and how to be critical about it.

CG: That is right. I like the example of the second group because they each brought different things to that project. One had a background in writing and research. She felt a little less secure about the making aspect but was still totally able to be involved in everything. Another brought graphic design into

it. Another was an industrial designer. It was a really well-balanced, multi-disciplinary group, and they found a way to say, “This is my thing. I can help the group with my thing.” They supported each other with their strengths.

RB: What advice do you have for designers who want to integrate more futuring and speculative design into their practice?

CG: First, understand the history. It is easy to look at the outputs of speculative design, even historically, and assume these are weird sculptural things, so learning the history is key.

Next, try to separate the allure of a word like “technology” from tools. Learn to divorce how you might react to the forms you see in speculative design from your understanding of the ways of working within it and the power of that. Understand the power of stories in design and between people. In class last week, my colleague Mathew Kneebone said, “An object is nothing without a story.” Implicitly, we learn it in design, but we are not always given the tools or the time to develop the way we tell stories, and that can be very powerful.

In class, I often frame futuring in opposition to human-centered design. When Ari Melenciano visited us, she asked why we are still talking about human-centered design.⁷ She challenged us to think about all sentient beings and how we relate to the world, humans just happening to be one part of it. Futuring can also be really accessible. You do not have to be trained as a designer. You do not need particular skills to be able to speculate. For example, with a very simple prompt, I can start to imagine what my life would be like in twenty years if I did not have water.

There are so many different ways in which speculation, foresight, or futuring are used in both art and industry, and it is important to understand that those things come from the same place. It might seem like a weird art thing, but giant companies use it all the time to do real things like making products. Speculative design is nothing new, and people are doing it all the time, so go for it.

JCRR: I am going to get political and philosophical. The political part is that it is really important to know the history of how futuring has been used for

7 California College of the Arts, *Ari Melenciano: Speculating Futures through Omni-Specialized Design*, YouTube video, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fcx6QFmJTKU>

terrible things. When we look at genocides and colonizations these people were thinking about creating futures. They were futuring, but that came with genocide and killing and destruction. Thus, when thinking about the future, there has to be a lot of responsibility in how we think about it, what we want to create, and for who and why. There are a lot of ideas and speculation about the future that bring oppression and destruction along with them. On the flip side, there is no conversation about the future without Afrofuturism, which is imagining the future from some of the most oppressed people on the planet. The discipline of speculative design has so much to learn from movements like Afrofuturism.

The philosophical part is that we have to understand time differently when thinking about the future. When we create something, it is probably going to live longer than us. We were thinking about the future while we were creating it, but we did not think about the full lifetime of that creation—not just our time, but the time of the objects and the projects we are creating, and what story and what legacy they are going to keep in the future, beyond our time, and beyond the person that designed it.

Those two things are really important: understanding the histories that come with futuring and understanding the different temporalities of futuring.

