



## THE IMPORTANCE OF CROSS-CULTURAL LEARNING IN THE DESIGN DISCIPLINES: A CASE STUDY REVIEWING A SERIES OF SHORT TERM STUDY TOURS DESIGNED TO SUPPORT CROSS-CULTURAL EXCHANGE IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC REGION

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Short-term overseas study tours are integral in tertiary education, and even more so in disciplines, such as design, that utilize and create culture. While these study tours offer limited and guided breadth of experience of a foreign culture, they represent an innovative global opportunity for students whom otherwise may not have the time, inclination, or simply cannot afford to travel overseas. This intercultural experience opens students' vision of the world to new cultures, different people and their customs, and different ways of thinking and doing. Experiential learning is especially important in creative disciplines such as design, where a user-centred approach is crucial. In the design disciplines creation has a very definite purpose, which is to cater to the needs and wants of people. A better understanding of different cultures also means a better understanding of different people, and this knowledge, which is vital for designers working in this interconnected global world, can be acquired through study trips. To support design study tours, the authors have applied for and secured continuing Australian Government funding to organize and facilitate an annual series of short-term study tours. The tours give students in the Bachelor of Graphic and Industrial Design at the University of Canberra experiences creating, exhibiting and critiquing design in Asia. Funding has supported tours to Shanghai (2012), Hong Kong (2013), Singapore (2014) and a future tour to Japan (2015) and Shanghai/Beijing (2015). The initial trip "Inspired by Shanghai" in 2012 focused on creating an original body of design work and tasked students with creating an exhibition of graphic posters to visualise their experience in a culture different to their own. Subsequently in 2013, students were provided an understanding of Chinese culture and design through an experience of studying wayfinding and signage in Hong Kong and in the most recent trip, to Singapore in 2014, the program was opened up to include Industrial Design students and looked at Packaging Design and Environmental Graphics in Singapore. The paper reflects on how these experiences can offer elements such as student recruitment and retention as well as opportunities to create new products and IP, build partnerships and industry relationships for continued research funding thus supporting a more sustainable approach to supporting design disciplines in higher education.

**Keywords:** Design, Education, Cross-cultural, Intercultural, Graphic design, Industrial design, Short-term overseas study trips.

### **Study Trips and Experiential Learning in Design Education**

Study trips offer tertiary students in the arts and design disciplines multi-faceted experiences that can shape a new world-view as well as informing new, interdisciplinary modes of thinking. According to Miao and Harris (2012, p.436) 'A study trip is an activity of learning through personal visits to one or more unfamiliar sites, where those sites (participants, interactions, lifestyles, cultures) are the subject of study.' There are a variety of different types of study trips – from semester long trips at partner institutions, trips which involve the student following a planned short-term study option of a few weeks to a month at a partner institution overseas, or an internally planned, discipline or a program-specific trip in which lecturers from the home institution take a group of students on a short-term planned trip to another country as to fulfil learning outcomes as part of the home institution's curriculum. Commonly, study trips are to unfamiliar sites, such as a foreign country or culture that is unknown to the participants, and bring together participants that have often had no previous contact beyond the classroom. Study trips are significantly different from other types of tertiary teaching models, such as online, formal face-to-face classroom teaching, or even blended learning, in that they are based on experiential and contextual learning rather than the formal, incremental learning process that is common in classroom teaching (Miao and Harris 2012, p.426). Learning experiences on a study tour require students to 'interpret phenomena that are not always specified in a structured curriculum' and 'what is learnt on a study trip derives from real life' (Miao and Harris 2012, p. 426).

Experiential learning happens when students are taken out of the traditional classroom or online teaching environment and into a foreign or unfamiliar environment for a period of time. This type of learning offers students both psychomotor and affective learning techniques with which to guide them in future career or academic situations. Psychomotor learning is defined as learning experiences that change behaviours or skills whereas affective learning is related to learning new values and/or the appreciation of different attitudes and approaches (Lee and Schottenfeld 2012). According to Lee and Schottenfeld (2012, p.334) 'experiential learning components intrinsically imbedded into sites of informal education such as museums, libraries and parks can be an effective method to balance the cognitive, affective and psychomotor domains of learning.' Traditional learning in a classroom setting is heavily focused on 'acquisition of knowledge rather than ethical and critically reflective competencies' and thus does not foster dramatic change of viewpoint or behavior in a short period (Lee and Schottenfeld 2012). In experiential learning, students are provided with real-life experiences in short intensive time periods, thus opening opportunities for intensive reflection and behavioral change. We believe that integrating short-term study trips within a traditional design education program creates a rich learning experience, linking theory to practice and generating new and applied thinking on design issues. Furthermore, interdisciplinarity within these study trips creates another level of richness and complexity which closely emulates teamwork in the professional workforce, and this further enhances the students' learning experience.

### **Cultural Aspects of Study Trips Within Design Education**

There are multilayered relationships between culture, education and design (Fincham and Rhodes, 1994, as cited by Razzaghi and Ramirez, 2009 p.440).

Culture is an anthropological term referring to the fundamental values, beliefs and codes of practice that make a community what it is. The customs of a society, the self-image of its members, and the things that show it as different from other societies constitute its culture.

It is important to note that culture is learned, not something inherent to people, and in those terms the process of education is a process of acculturation (or the cultural change resulting from the meeting of diverse cultures). Parrish and Linder-VanBerschoot (2010, p.5) explain that 'teaching and learning are not only embedded in culture, they are cultural transmission in action – the means to culture'.

Today's globalized world offers increasing opportunities in which cross-cultural and intercultural relationships and interactions, as well as multicultural contexts, occur more frequently. Within the context of education, Fries (n.d) differentiates the term cross-cultural from intercultural and multicultural. She explains that 'cross-cultural' applies to something, which covers more than one culture (i.e. a cross-cultural comparative study) while 'intercultural' implies interaction, such as the cases of cultural adaptation and culture shock, usually experienced when living or studying in a foreign country and culture (Fries n.d.). Multicultural, when referred to a society (as the Australian one) or context, is usually associated to a melting pot where different cultures coexist. Parrish and Linder-VanBerschot (2010), suggest that the growing multicultural nature of education requires that educators develop skills for culturally sensitive and culturally adaptive teaching and learning.

The disciplines within design also have strong links to culture. From the point of view of industrial design and within an anthropological perspective, we understand culture by studying the objects and artefacts made and used by a group of people. As well as artefacts help us to understand and study a culture, design is an active *creator* of culture and meaning. Simultaneously, from the point of view of graphic design our current society is also greatly defined by this *visual culture*, which provides the visual articulation of the continuous displacement of meaning in the field of vision and the visible.

Many studies in industrial and product design discuss cultural aspects of design, such as cultural affordance of products (Razzaghi and Ramirez 2009), culture oriented product design (Moalosi, Popovic & Hickling-Hudson 2008) and the impact of cultural aspects on the design process (Flegen et al, 2004). However, while cultural aspects are definitive in design, some authors suggest that globalization has caused homogenization and lack of diversity in design, as well as standardization of design education (Norman 2012) and design curricula around the world is almost identical. Furthermore, after analysing 22 industrial design courses from around 200 courses approached, Razzaghi and Ramirez (2009) found that a majority of design courses suffer from a lack of subjects related to the links of design and culture.

A key benefit to short term study trips is international exchange and cultural immersion. Global learning is key to students in the 21<sup>st</sup> century particularly in Australia - a multicultural country with a diverse mix of cultures from over 250 countries (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2011). Therefore, no matter what field a student enters on graduation, it can be assumed that a strong knowledge of dealing with and understanding a culture foreign from one's own is essential for career success. Williams and Best explain (2014, p.242):

Cross-cultural awareness has a number of critical elements but perhaps the most significant is for an individual to demonstrate cross-cultural awareness, the fundamental requirement of which is the ability to be open to new ideas and have the capacity to change such ideas when necessary.

Cross-cultural awareness also covers an individual's ability to view the world in an open and non-judgmental way from a position of tolerance and understanding. The culture that one has been born into and is most familiar with has a strong impact on the way images, symbols and behaviours are interpreted (Lester 2003, p. 59). Studies by Lipsett (2008) show that graduates who have studied abroad, even for a short period of time, are more culturally adaptable, aware and able to work more effectively in multicultural work environments than students without this experience. International study trips force student to look outwards whilst at the same time reflecting inwards on how their own cultural behaviours fit into a wider global picture.

### **Disciplinary in Design Education**

Work across different disciplines is commonly and indiscriminately called cross-disciplinary, interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary. Cross-disciplinary is defined as 'of, relating to, or involving two or more disciplines' (Merriam Webster Online Dictionary 2014). There has been much research into interdisciplinary modes of learning across varying fields in education. Some of this research has mapped the exchanges and scholarly benefits of knowledge as an interdisciplinary learning

environment known as a *trading zone* (Mills and Huber 2005) where a convergence of tacit knowledge occurs. It is within this interchange of fields that, according to (Huber and Morreale 2002, p.19):

Scholars are busy simplifying, translating, telling and persuading ‘foreigners’ to hear their stories and try their wares. In this zone, one finds scholars of teaching and learning seeking advice, collaborations, references, methods, and colleagues to fill in whatever their own disciplinary communities cannot or will not provide.

Buchanan (1992) discusses design thinking in the 20<sup>th</sup> century examining the expansion of underlying design meaning, thinking and connections- he delineates that the combinations of design thinking, practice and collaboration reveal prodigious dimensions of understanding. Furthermore, Buchanan (1992, p.5) outlines growth in creative technological culture in design deviating away from a previous ‘trade activity, to a segmented profession, to a field of expertise in technical research of liberal arts and technological culture.’ It is here at the axis of design fields that the exchange of ideas and design thinking can activate new and innovative ways of incorporating interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary modes of pedagogical design and thinking. The hybridised learning pools of undergraduate Industrial Design and Graphic Design students are an area for exploration in interdisciplinary educational collaboration. Graphic designers, as a simple definition, are symbolic, visual communicators and industrial designers; conceptual creators of material objects. When given the opportunity to collaborate and integrate students from both fields, as students may have some common skills and expertise and as on the whole they think visually and use similar tools/software, opportunities for collaboration and interdisciplinary exchange are easily coordinated.

Collaborations between disciplines can create unique learning outcomes, as creativity itself is often generated on interplay between people of varying disciplines with divergent ideas and skill sets. De Jong (2014, p.12) discusses collaboration and the creative synergy as: ‘The idea is that bringing different perspectives together is more likely to generate something new.’ Charles Saumarez Smith (in De Jong 2014, p.12) emphasises that ‘much time and effort has to be invested in partnership activities. Partnerships are hard work; groups of practitioners often develop their own language and value systems. A certain level of translation and understanding of each other’s creative world needs to take place.’ Therefore, collaboration as a form of cross-disciplinary and interdisciplinary pedagogical exchange can create interesting new synergies. Gertz (p.150, 2000) explains that interdisciplinary collaboration is essential to:

Set ourselves free to make such connections and disconnections between fields of inquiry as seen appropriate and productive, not to prejudge what may be learned from what, or what may traffic from what.

### **Inspired by Global Design: Graphic & Industrial Design Study Trip to Singapore 2014**

Over the past four years, the Graphic Design discipline at the University of Canberra has secured funding from the federal government (through the AsiaBound and New Colombo Plan funding programs) for a suite of short-term study trips that explore Asian culture and design. These units give students in the Bachelor of Graphic Design learning experiences creating, exhibiting and critiquing design in Asia. Funding has supported trips to Shanghai (2012), Hong Kong (2013), Singapore (2014), Japan (2015) and Shanghai/Guangzhou (2015). The initial trip “Inspired by Shanghai” in 2012 focused on creating an original body of design work and tasked students with creating an exhibition of graphic posters to visualise their experience in a culture different to their own. Subsequently in 2013, students were provided an understanding of Chinese culture and design through an experience of studying wayfinding and signage in Hong Kong and in the most recent trip, to Singapore in 2014, the program was opened up to include Industrial Design students and looked at packaging Design and environmental graphics in Singapore.

The “Inspired by Singapore” tour was a faculty-led short-term trip that encompassed a 16 day trip of Singapore (from June 1 – 16, 2014) in which Graphic and Industrial Design students collaborated to create mini retail shops (including design of branding, point of sale, product and packaging) for an on-campus design market to encourage an understanding of cross-cultural design, interdisciplinarity and entrepreneurship in design. During the trip, students explored their understanding of the contemporary design culture, retail graphics, signage and visual language of Singapore. Students researched retail design and signage in Singapore in order to create products, promotional items and signage. In workshops with Singaporean universities and polytechnics, Australian students were able to work with Singaporean students to create new ideas for cross-cultural packaging design strategies. Students also met with artists, architects and fashion designers in Singapore throughout the trip to get an overall idea of the importance of art and design in the country. Through tours of markets, museums, galleries, temples, design studios and other places of interest in Singapore - students were given local insight into the unique multicultural diversity within Singapore, which combines elements of Chinese, Malay and Indian culture within a contemporary urban setting. On the final day of the trip, students presented their concepts and prototypes to design professionals from leading packaging and design firms in Singapore for feedback. On completion of the trip, students worked in groups to produce their concepts back on the home campus. The unit culminated in a student-led Design Market on the University of Canberra Open Day (an event designed to showcase the University and its courses to the general public) in August of 2014, where students sold their products to the public.

Three credit points for the unit *Packaging Design and Environmental Graphics* – a core Graphic Design unit and an elective unit in Industrial Design, were attained on completion of the trip and relevant assessment tasks. The unit consisted of three assessment tasks that maximised opportunities for cross-cultural research and interdisciplinary collaboration, to enable a thorough understanding of design principles relating to packaging design. The first assessment, a Process Diary, was a digital diary that documented visual and contextual grounds for the production of design elements for the second and third assessment items. The diary was generated from activities set during the first week of the Singapore study trip and encompassed research on products, branding and retail graphics and display in Singapore. The second assessment item was a group assessment in which Graphic and Industrial design students worked together to create a template, signage for the stall (with signage applied) for a graphic design market stall to be utilized for display on the University of Canberra’s Open Day. The stall was meant to be a direct response to the research explained through the individual Process Diaries. The third assessment was an individual assessment item that required students to create a product design and packaging template for a suitable packaging for the product with a complete mock-up of product and packaging.

The Singapore tour provided the students with rich, contextual experiences and gave them solid teamwork and cross-cultural skills. In student feedback from the trip – the experience was said to be one in which students were “*immersed*” and “*absorbed*” in the culture. Many students that participated in the trip had never left the country and so they were given an eye-opening experience into a different set of cultural norms and ways of thinking. Comments below highlight the effect of the tour on generating cross-cultural awareness and cultural reflection.

I learnt about cultural differences and how society differed on many levels such as how hard working the people were compared to here in Aussie. It was really opportunity to travel to a new place while being absorbed into the different, creative and inspiring aspects and taking away new knowledge from the trip. – Student 1 (Feedback Report 2014)

The Singapore trip gave me a firsthand experience and insight into different cultures, customs and beliefs that enabled me to identify the similarities, differences and connections with my own Australian culture. – Student 2 (Feedback Report 2014)

At home you can get bogged down in the need to just get the work done, and outside factors like paid work and social life which can distract you from seeing inspiration opportunities around you, but on the trip to Singapore I was taken out of my comfort zone and given a chance to see all

types of design in another country. The whole trip rejuvenated my love for Design and I have a ton of new ideas for future work. – Student 3 (Feedback Report 2014)

Survey data following the trip revealed that students found the experience highly relevant to their degree and career aspirations. The trip also provided students with a drive to explore other cultures. 100% of the students rated the cultural engagement attained on the trip as 8/10 or above and 92% of students would consider undertaking another overseas study experience, with 76% of students being interested in international internships. In terms of the interdisciplinary aspects of the program, overall, students were extremely satisfied with the program structure and the activities, but noted a high focus on industrial rather than graphic design as the only downfall. This finding is interesting as lecturers had placed a strong focus on both areas, however, it may be that Graphic Design students, who had previously focused on 2D applications of design up to that point in their studies, when developing the 3D applications of design, felt the project as “industrial”, rather than graphic design. In the future, to avoid this assumption, prepping the students’ expectations and understandings of 2D and 3D design through an explanation of how the two fields merge in the area of packaging and 3D design application would be beneficial prior to the trip (Feedback Report 2014).

## **Conclusions and Further Research**

The authors believe that short-term overseas study tours are integral in tertiary education, and even more so in disciplines which utilize, as well as create culture, such as the design disciplines. While these study tours offer limited and guided breadth of experience of a foreign culture, they represent an innovative global opportunity for students whom otherwise may not have the time, inclination, or simply cannot afford to travel overseas. This intercultural experience opens students’ vision of the world to new cultures, different people and their customs, and different ways of thinking and doing. Experiential learning is especially important in creative disciplines such as design, where a user-centred approach is crucial. In the design disciplines creation has a very definite purpose, which is to cater to the needs and wants of people. A better understanding of different cultures also means a better understanding of different people, and this knowledge, which is vital for designers working in this interconnected global world, can be acquired through study trips.

Interpersonal and communications skills are strengthened through these experiences as conviviality is exchanged in a way not possible during class hours or through a web based education site (in the case of online learning); study trips can improve social skills in the students helping to build the necessary teamwork and communication skills to prepare them for the workforce. Furthermore, the closer relationship between students and staff creates an environment of trust and camaraderie, which is sometimes difficult to achieve only through the contact hours specified in the curriculum, and this is even more challenging in blended or online teaching modes. Study trips can also promote peer learning as in *Inspired by Singapore*, in which students from graphic design learned about 3 dimensionality, materials and manufacture from the ID students, while ID students learned about graphics, signage and branding from the GD students. Although not surveyed, possibly students also improved their design software skills, printing and prototyping technologies through this exchange, and especially through the teamwork.

In order for this type experiential learning to be fruitful, the authors believe that it is essential that the study offshore is linked to a specific design project, which is connected and related to the destination visited. This pointed set of outcomes drives the students to more astutely observe and analyse their *new* surroundings, and thus makes for a more meaningful experience addressing learning outcomes. Furthermore, connecting these study trips to concrete units and design projects not only allows the students to gain academic credit for what they do, but this can also help clarify the misunderstanding that a tour is equated with a “holiday” and based only on simply experiencing a new place as a “tourist.” Although, it is true that learning comes not only through the project, but also through the experience and “enjoyment” of the visited site, essentially the trip should be a rigorous and intensive period of study equivalent to a full semesters’ study in a single unit. To avoid misunderstandings about the learning

outcomes of trip, it is important that short-term study tours are able to communicate direct learning outcomes to the home institution. This can often be achieved through the continued learning opportunities on the home campus through a further period of study to discuss the cross-cultural experiences attained and/or exhibition of the assessment tasks work achieved in both environments.

Although geographically not so distant, the cultures of Australia and Singapore are quite different. A possible tool to understand culture in education is the learning framework CDFL (Parrish and Linder-VanBerschot 2010) which is based in important cultural work from authors such as Hofstede and Hofstede (2005), Nisbett (2003), Levine (1997), Hall (1983), and Lewis (2006). In the CDFL, Parrish and Linder-VanBerschot propose eight key cultural dimensions which they grouped under the three topics of 1. Social relationships, 2. Epistemological beliefs, and 3. Temporal perceptions. These define very significant differences between Asian and Western cultures such as *individualism and collectivism* and *stability seeking and uncertainty acceptance*. While this framework is meant specifically to be used for understanding and addressing the challenges of multicultural education, and especially for online learning environments, we would argue that it can also be used to better understand (and possibly plan more meaningful) overseas study trips for design disciplines. For example, setting study trips to locations where cultural dimensions are significantly different than those of the country where the educational institution is situated gives potential for an enriched cultural experience due to a bigger cultural diversity which could even cause a certain degree of “*cultural shock*”. This cultural diversity (and especially language barriers) will force design students to rely more in their observation skills (rather than verbal abilities) and in this sense, forces them to use their design communication skills (2D and 3D, rather than verbal abilities too). While this is just an initial hypothesis by the authors based on their personal experiences overseas, as well as reflection upon the recent study trip, further research is needed to study this potential application of the CDFL for study trip planning.

Finally, a desirable outcome of short overseas study trips is the possibility of linking this educational experience with research, be it practice-led or about the scholarship of teaching and learning in design. A reflective process upon a teaching experience, such as the reflective process which drives this paper, should not be merely a *this is what I did* exercise, but rather a reflection and thought process which helps better understand the pros and cons of the past teaching experience, and hopefully offers further theoretical background within the scholarship of teaching and learning in art and design education, as well as tools for future similar projects.

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