DESIGN PEDAGOGY COMPETENCIES: CROSS-CULTURAL COLLABORATION FOR A CHANGING FUTURE

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ABSTRACT:

The last twenty years have seen a fundamental shift in the design profession. Where once design was neatly segmented into specific practices based upon form or output (graphic, product, fashion, etc.), design is now often practiced holistically, less concerned with final forms but with overall change affected. Additionally, advances in production and communication technologies have reshaped the design marketplace. Design is truly a global affair where an artefact might be designed on one continent, produced on another and sold in a third.

There is a need for design education to evolve to address these changes.

This paper interrogates a pair of collaborative international projects that attempt to address some of the opportunities and challenges required for a new design curriculum. Through the lens of cross-cultural design education, students in Canada and Hong Kong collaborated on projects that explored issues of culture, research and communication and examined new design territories through co-creation.

INTRODUCTION

The roles and possibilities afforded to design over the last two decades have dramatically increased. Growing out of an industrial history with focus on the design of artefacts that neatly fit into categories (graphic, product, etc), the design profession is now faced with addressing a world that is filled with complex challenges (Burns et al. 2006). As Sanders and Stappers note "we are designing for the future experiences of people, communities and cultures who now are connected and informed in ways that were un-imaginable even 10 years ago" (2008: 6). Many in the design profession have recognized that the traditional designer-centered approach is incapable of dealing with the complex world today and have altered their practices. Designers are working in such areas as experience design, design for diverse and geographically removed cultures, and strategic design in public policy (Burns et al. 2006) (Miller & Rudnick 2011). For many the old distinctions of practice have fallen by the way side.

Design education has not been as quick to adapt or recognize these needed changes, especially in countries where the education of designers has only more recently begun integrating into academia. The education of a designer traces its routes back to an apprenticeship system and while design programmes have evolved, with many situated within the university system now, there is still a prevalence of programmes that are focused on fitting into the academic structure rather than the requirements of the design profession. As Canniffe notes "The institution continues to focus inwardly and think myopically whilst the design world requires global thinkers who are outwardly looking and able to understand complex problems" (2011:5).

This paper presents and examines a series of collaborative international projects that interrogate some of these opportunities and challenges faced by design education, specifically, by looking at issues of and through cross-cultural design education. Pairing up design students and academics from a research university in Canada and a design institute in Hong Kong, the projects were designed so students could explore issues of culture, research and communication and examine new design territories through co-creation. Additionally we were interested in ensuring that students gained experience in demonstrating a key range of design communication skills. These projects are presented and analysed with data from observation, surveys, interviews, documentation of work completed and discourse captured through social media. Briefs included a collaborative cultural identity project and a design brief where students had the opportunity of designing for another culture while working with a visiting professor. Design academics from each institution worked together to record, share, examine and build upon specific cultural and pedagogic practices.

We begin by examining the changing landscape of the design profession and contrast this with a current profile of design education. We then present two collaborative design projects that situate culture and communication at their core. We conclude by exploring the benefits and challenges of the projects.

DESIGN: A SHIFTING PROFESSION

Design is at a truly exciting time. Where once it dealt with very specific, well-defined and local problems – the design of a new chair or a logotype for a neighboring client – today the possibilities afforded to design are much more complex and far-reaching (Melsop, Gill, and Chan 2010). Design, design thinking and design processes are being employed to address major social issues – from health reform to how education systems are structured to designing for and across divergent cultures (Burns et al. 2006). This shift from shaping form to shaping behaviour, as Burns et al term it, is at the heart of these exciting changes.

Addressing, and designing for, complex, culturally heterogeneous, ill-defined problems has required designers to change how they work. They recognize the need to incorporate analytical and synthetic planning skills into the design process and to employ rich and rigorous research practices to inform, support and validate their work (Friedman 2002). They are exploring issues of co-design, participatory design and system design to address identified issues but also to identify new challenges and problems.

How designers collaborate is also changing. Due to globalization, a collapsed manufacturing base in many countries and advances in communication and collaboration technologies designers are finding themselves working more globally (Yee, McKelvey, & Jefferies 2009: 3). Often they are working in teams comprised of people around the world and across time zones, cultures and in multiple languages. Designers now work with a variety of people in a

multitude of locations through a myriad of technologies. As Canniffe notes the marketplace is now "global, complex, fast moving, culturally sensitive and volatile" and designers have changed how they work to take advantage of, and often drive, these changes (2011:2).

While the design profession has largely adapted to the changes and possibilities presented in the twenty-first century, design education has not been as quick.

DESIGN EDUCATION & ACADEMIA: POSSIBILITIES AND REQUIREMENTS

The traditional design education curriculum, particularly in western cultures, is built around a system that attempts to mirror, in the classroom, the design industry, to prepare students to enter the design profession upon graduation. Typically students undertake projects that are simulations of diluted representative briefs that they may encounter in the professional design studio. These projects fit neatly into the course timetable and generally move along in a fairly straightforward and controlled manner with the instructor often playing dual roles of teacher and art director.

While the design profession has drastically expanded and evolved over the last twenty years there has been much less change to design curriculum over this same period of time. Students continue to work on "artificial" briefs in the controlled space of their classrooms with not enough opportunity to gain experience in the wider range skills and expertise needed of the design profession today (Canniffe 2011:1).

Design students need greater opportunities to work within the new areas and ways of practice that the design profession is working in. Students need, particularly in the senior years, to work on briefs that are situated in and outside of the classroom studio, working on projects that are more complex and that introduce them to working in and through a global context. These briefs need to be outside of the comfort zone of the students (and often the instructors and programme), allowing opportunities for growth and more engaged and deep learning (Frascara 2007: 6).

In addition to curriculum that is situated in new territories, the briefs need to be delivered and structured in ways that better reflect the design profession. Students need greater opportunities of collaborating, working with other students and partners, exploring a variety or roles in the design process. Today it is crucial for design students to develop communication skills in both local and global contexts– students need exposure to other cultures, practices and future collaborators. In short they need to be able to work in teams, communicate effectively, share knowledge and work with designers and collaborators from multiple disciplines (Yee, McKelvey, & Jefferies 2009: 3).

In short the design curriculum must be what Bentley refers to as "broader" in that it includes a wider range of experiences and roles for the students (1998: 1). Addressing these changes would enable design education to become more proactive in its relationship with the design profession, helping to broaden and lead it, establishing the new parameters for what design will, and needs to, be in the twenty-first century (Melsop, Gill, and Chan 2010).

In light of these challenges, and opportunities, we present a series of projects that attempt to address some of these concerns. These projects are not meant to solve all the issues noted above (and others) or to lay out the perfect curriculum for design education, but we feel that they move us forward and help to interrogate the space that we need to address.

PROJECT 1: HONG KONG DESIGN INSTITUTE & UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA: DESIGNING CITY IDENTITIES

Our first collaborative project involved students from the University of Alberta's (UofA) Visual Communication Design programme working with design students from the Hong Kong Design Institute (HKDI) on a project entitled *Designing City Identities*. This brief brought together 30 students to work on the project, 15 third year students from the UofA would work on branding Hong Kong, China while 15 third year students from HKDI would work on branding Edmonton, Canada (the location of the UofA).

The *Designing City Identities* project was designed so that students, and staff, could explore issues of culture, research and communication and examine new design territories through co-creation. Each student from the UofA was paired up with a HKDI student for the entirety of the project – with each serving as a client / advisor to their partner throughout the brief.

A blog (figures 1 & 2) was set up to serve as a means of communication and as a means of documentation – students used the blog to post up work and their partners would then communicate through it, continuing to add to their previous comments.
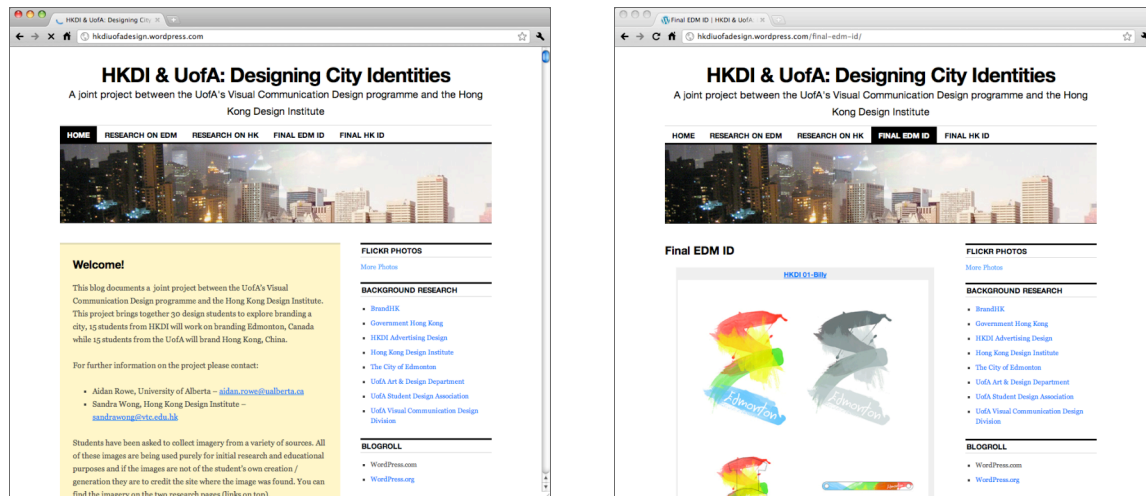
Figs 1 & 2: Blog used by students and staff for the *HKDI / UofA Designing Cities Identities* Project

We followed a standard design process for the brief. The project was broken up into four phases: research > design > refine > apply. Between each stage students posted up work to receive feedback from partners, allowing for an opportunity of reflection between the stages.

We began the project with initial research of the students' assigned cities. We employed a variety of methods – students explored through popular media (film, music, etc), history and geography. One approach was through Flickr Galleries. A Flickr Gallery allows you to curate a selection of up to 16 images shot by other Flickr members (that agree to share their images) – in short students can search through Flickr and gather found images into a collection. You are able to explore other people's images to aggregate one of your own. Students from HKDI searched through and chose images of Edmonton while UofA students explored Hong Kong. Students then presented their findings to their partners to receive feedback.

After the initial research phase students began the design phase of the project. Students began work on designing the city identities; initial concepts were developed and presented. Feedback was given with at least two more rounds of refinement. The final brand identities were presented to local classes and online.

While the main task of the brief was a standard design project – the development of a brand identity for a client, the addition of the communication and culture elements helped to create a more complex project that provided numerous education challenges for the students.

In the first instance, students needed to undertake primary and secondary forms of research. They were forced to explore means of better understanding a culture that was physically, historically and socially removed from themselves. They devised a variety of ways of gaining this understanding – interviews with people who had visited the locations to investigating other cultural documentations – music, fashion, film, etc. They were forced out of their standard comfort zones – they needed to conduct research and to be able to present that research to who they were studying.

Students also needed to explore how they were going to communicate with their partners. A central class blog was used; students also devised other means of communication that worked for their requirements and the relationships they built with their international partners. Many students also employed email or Skype. Exploring alternate forms of communication was beneficial as it allowed different contributory opportunities for students besides those traditionally found in the studio. Within the studio, or in critique, most communication is verbal while on a blog the written format allows for a different type of commentary – enabling greater reflection in addition to sustained commentary. As a student noted, "I really think communicating by words was important to articulating my thoughts". Another student commented, "I really considered what my HK student was trying to communicate. I think it was easier to reflect on because you had their thoughts and your thoughts in writing."
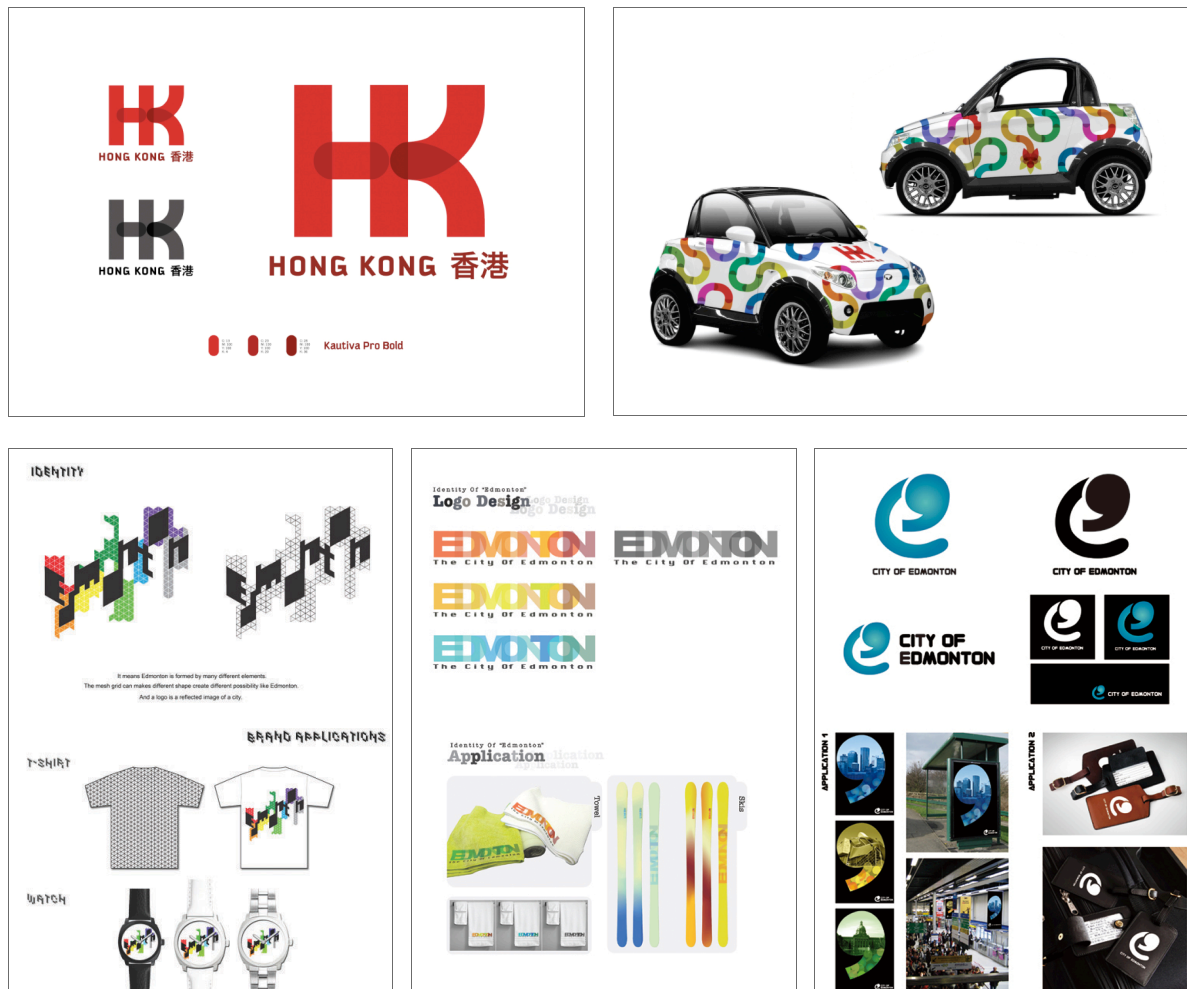
Figs 3–7: *HKDI / UofA Designing Cities Identities* Project Work from UofA and HKDI Students

Students also needed to assume different roles – in addition to the designer role they also had to act as the client for their international partner. They needed to articulate why the work they completed fit the brief in addition to analyzing and communicating to their partner the strengths and weaknesses of the work completed. This role switching – from active to passive and back again is an important learning opportunity. As one student noted "the best opportunity was having some back and forth between us and student (sic) in Hong Kong".

The brief also created opportunities for students to further consider and articulate their own culture. They needed to examine representations of their culture, evaluate and communicate their findings to their partners. Making "explicit what has been implicit within one's own culture" was a crucial benefit to the project (Goncu-Berk, DeLong, & LaBat 2010: 2).

The *Designing City Identities* project allowed 30 students the opportunity to collaborate across cultures and to design in a global context. In addition to the focused collaborative nature of this project we also explored issues of culture and communication in a cross-culture brief delivered by a visiting academic in the following project.

## PROJECT 2: HONG KONG DESIGN INSTITUTE & CROSS CULTURAL DESIGN

Following on from the *Designing City Identities* project we wanted to devise a brief that explored similar territory but that also offered new learning possibilities – for students and staff. In fall 2010 an opportunity arose for a design academic from the University of Alberta's Visual Communication Design programme to visit the Hong Kong Design Institute. The visiting academic spent a week with students on the Advertising and Branding programme at HKDI leading a brief that explored issues of communication and branding for other cultures.

The brief was entitled *Hong Kong Design Institute & Cross Cultural Design* and brought together 32 second and third year students to work on a project for one week that explored introducing a culturally significant commercial product into another culture. We looked at introducing an instant noodle brand popular in Hong Kong into the Canadian market. HKDI students needed to chose from three popular brands (none of which had a significant presence in Canada). Students then needed to study the Canadian marketplace and devise an advertising campaign that positioned the brand within their chosen Canadian market. This advertising campaign needed to go across traditional (print, billboard, etc) and digital delivery (iPhones, smartphones, etc) methods.

Similar to the *Designing City Identities* project, the *Cross Cultural Design* brief was designed so that students, and staff, could explore issues of culture, research and communication and examine new design territories through co-creation. With the presence of the visiting academic (an expert, or at least evidence of, in the culture to be explored) we also explored issues of how students work with a contained brief delivered by an outsider.

Again we followed a fairly standard design process for this brief in four phases: research > design > refine > apply. Between each stage students critiqued work, amongst themselves and with HKDI staff and the visiting academic allowing for opportunities of reflection.
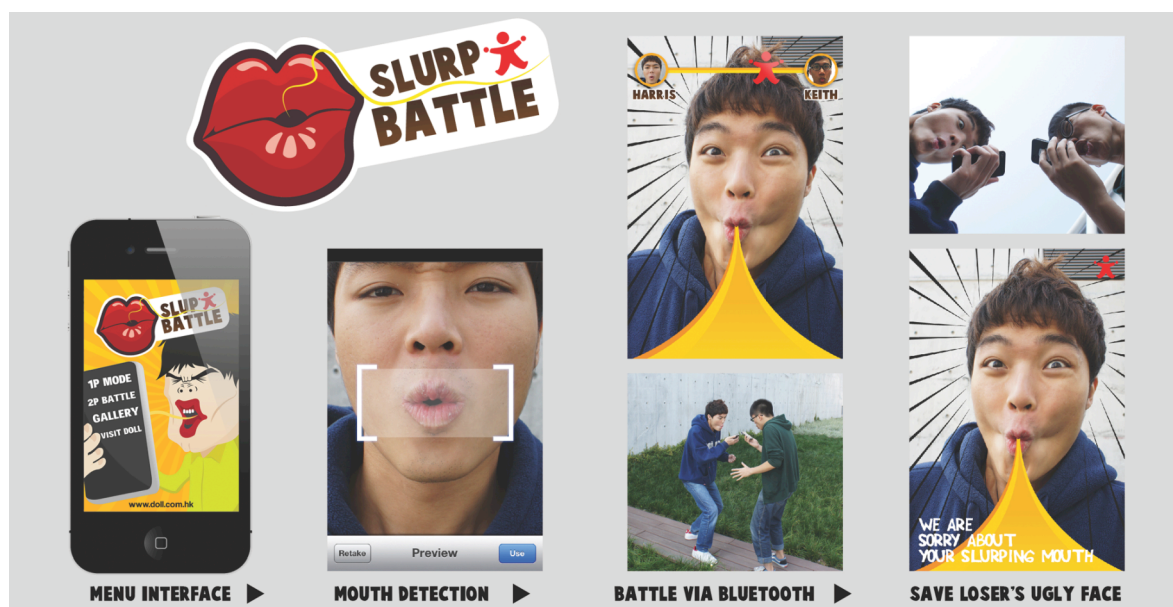
Figs 8–9 (top row): *HKDI Cross Cultural Design* Examples: Traditional Media formats
Figs 10 (bottom row): *HKDI Cross Cultural Design* Examples: Interactive Media formats

We began with a Flick research stage, students used Flickr to document and communicate their chosen instant noodle soup and they also had to document their target market – Canada and Canadians. Working in groups of four the students completed the documentation of their chosen brand themselves – they shot images of their brand, where it was found, how it was consumed, the local target audience, etc. These images were then posted on Flickr to present to the class and instructors for feedback. Research on the target market was conducted by creating Flickr Galleries from other users' images – allowing the students to explore, document and communicate what they believe Canada and Canadians to be.

Students then moved into the design phase – they had to devise an advertising campaign to launch the brand in Canada exploring traditional media formats as well as interactive possibilities.

The design brief was a fairly standard one – the introduction of an established brand into a newly identified market sits easily within the realm of any design or advertising curriculum. The additional opportunities created by the cultural and communication elements helped to create a richer project with a variety of benefits for the students.

Students needed to explore digital technologies for the project. In the first instance, students needed to use a popular social media tool, Flickr, for initial research documentation and gathering. For many students this was the first use of this software for an academic or professional purpose and allowed them to formalize their initial research practices. They also had to explore new possibilities afforded by interactive technologies, specifically smart phones, as an advertising medium. Digital technologies are a major focus of future design possibilities and exploring the notion of the interactive in light of advertising was new (and rich) territory for many of the students.

As the brief revolved around culture, students were forced to undertake research, primary and secondary, that interrogated both their own culture and that of their target audience. Students had to document their own culture to present to someone from a different culture – exploring issues of communication and clarity. Additionally they had to navigate other people's documentation of their culture, deciding what adequately represented their culture. Students were forced into new areas of research, identification and communication. As Pedersen et al note exposure to a wide variety of cultures in relation to design aesthetics enables graduates to "develop richly woven global perspectives in their professional design work following graduation" (Pedersen et al, 2011: 88).

Students also needed to work in teams in a collaborative learning environment, defining and negotiating roles and managing their contributions to the overall team. This collaborative environment allowed the individual members to assess their own strengths and contributions, allowing them to take their individual ideas to another level by pushing each other. Team learning environments also create alternative learning models, where advanced learners scaffold other team members – they learn from each other. In short students replicate in the classroom roles that they would professionally play (Yee, McKelvey, & Jefferies 2009: 13).

Students also had the opportunity of working with a visiting academic. Having to deal with and negotiate the requirements from a new instructor, an outsider, enabled students to gain experience in communication and collaboration. As the instructor was also from another culture students needed to explicitly discuss and share their own culture, situating the decisions that they have made within this context. This articulation was required due to the cultural heterogeneity – and forcing the students to describe their culture was an important step in recognizing the role that their own culture played, and continues to play, in their own life.

BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES

In addition to the benefits noted above, there are a variety of benefits for other participants when undertaking cross-cultural collaboration projects.

Design academics working together have opportunities of: gaining co-teaching experience with international collaborators; benefitting from exposure to other design pedagogies and practices; interrogating their own cultural beliefs and representations; developing new models and means of facilitating communication through traditional and new technologies; and, importantly they are also forced to push their own teaching practice into new and possibly ill-defined territory. In short design academics move into many of the same new terrains as their students.

There are also benefits for the institutions involved, they: gain exposure of best practices in new markets; enrich the teaching and learning opportunities for their staff and students;

and, they forge alliances that could lead to greater opportunities for collaboration. In short engaging in international collaboration makes for a better university and better student experience (Churchill quoting Thrift 2011).

In addition to the benefits that international collaboration provides there are also challenges – primarily represented by expenditure of resources, both material and human. These projects take time and funding (in the instance of visiting academics). As noted above to undertake projects like these design academics also need to move into new terrain, trying new things and taking chances. And with any foray into new space there is greater chance of the unknown, missteps and mistakes. But without these experiments, if we just keep doing what we have always done we end up educating the designers of tomorrow for the past.

CONCLUSION

There is a need for design education to embrace the changes that are becoming more and more evident in the design profession. Design curriculum needs to explore these territories, investigating complex and ill-defined problems where the output is not purely an artefact or form but concerned with shaping and changing behavior. (Burns et al. 2006) Briefs need to allow opportunities for students to collaborate in and out of the studio, for students to explore issues of technology, communication and culture opening up a "wider understanding of the complexity and interconnectivity of the world, and their role as a designer within that complex system" (Canniffe 2011:12).

The projects documented above are our initial forays into using collaborative projects with a cross-cultural focus to address some of the changes identified and needed in design education. We know that the roles, requirements and possibilities afforded to design practice will continue to increase in the future, that greater and more complex challenges will continue to arise. What is needed now is thoughtful and responsive changes to design education to ensure that we are educating the designers of tomorrow to be the considerate, articulate and global citizens needed.

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