

BUILDING CROSS-BORDER COMMUNITIES: TRANS-NATIONAL INNOVATION DESIGN STUDENTS CREATE TRANS-CULTURAL INNOVATIONS AND A GLOBAL NETWORK OF PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT

Design is increasingly an international or trans-cultural activity: tackling challenges that affect people and populations other than our own, involving creators and stakeholders from multiple nations and cultures, implemented across borders via networks and communities of knowledge, services, materials, manufacturing and distribution.

In 2013 a new joint Masters course in innovation design began in London, as a collaboration between centres of academic excellence in UK, USA and Japan. Students of many nationalities are based in London but spend two out of six terms overseas. This year the course has expanded to include a second track; when half the students go to Tokyo and New York, others head to Beijing and Singapore, then both rejoin in London for the final two terms of the course. On this journey students experience differing teaching styles, perspectives and specialisms around design, technology and innovation from world-class institutions, in immersive collaborations with students and faculty from diverse disciplines and cultures. This has resulted in the formation of a community of practice, knowledge and friendship in a network spanning the globe.

The paper serves to update and expand on a previously published account of the programme [1], so it will briefly address major changes in structure, content and teaching approaches that have followed in this time. On the theme of Building Community, it outlines the rationale and philosophy of the course with global community at its heart, and its evolution over the first three and a half years into a network of past and present students, faculty and friends, with examples of community-embedded innovations that reflect the cross-cultural perspective enabled by the programme.

Keywords: multidisciplinary, transnational, global, innovation

1 INTRODUCTION

Students on the Global Innovation Design (GID) program (www.rca.ac.uk/gid), run jointly by the Royal College of Art and Imperial College, London, are experiencing a pioneering new approach to postgraduate design education. The course was established in response to a growing demand from individuals ambitious to make an impact on the world through life-changing or world-changing innovations [1].

Students spend a term embedded at each partner university, which contributes its own learning philosophy and practice of design. They work in local, and also globally-distributed, teams to research and develop product and service design concepts and innovations informed by local cultural experiences, in Japan or Beijing, then USA or Singapore. The course is now in its fourth year. Its third cohort will graduate in Summer 2017, while its fourth is about to embark on the international phase of the program. The philosophical foundations of the course are outlined here, which underpin its emerging community of practice and friendship, followed by reflections of some of its pioneering students.

2 CONTEXT

2.1 Multidisciplinary design

The application of designers' tools and methods can to address complex challenges is widely recognised [2, 3, 4, 5, 6], as a valuable approach to understand complex challenges where analytical approaches have proved inadequate, but most powerfully in the hands of multidisciplinary teams. This is observed in industry [7], and academic institutions are seeking to foster collaborative skills through postgraduate programs for students from diverse backgrounds [8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13].

This aspect of the programme has been documented more fully [1], but here we will focus on one of the fortunate but less anticipated outcomes for participating students, that is the importance and value of community, both during and after their experience.

2.2 Local Immersion, Global Community

Globalisation is an unavoidable buzzword of the 21st century. Taken as “the widening, deepening and speeding up of global interconnection” [14] it is a phenomenon that impacts, directly or indirectly, almost every aspect of modern daily life, and carries both positive and negative connotations. In *The Lexus and The Olive Tree* [15], Friedman identifies a tension between two key struggles now facing the world: the drive for prosperity and development, and the desire to retain local and national cultural identity and traditions. Friedman describes three phases of globalisation [16]: after Globalisation 1.0 (of countries), then 2.0 (of companies), we entered, at the turn of the millennium, Globalisation 3.0, the globalisation of individuals, distinguished by “the newfound power for individuals to collaborate and compete globally.” In the current global era, Friedman urges, “individuals must, and can, now ask, ‘Where do I fit into the global competition and opportunities of the day, and how can I, on my own, collaborate with others globally?’”

[16 pp. 9-11]

This question is pertinent for designers, amongst whom international collaboration is swiftly becoming not only a possibility, but a necessity. Designers will be designing products, services and systems for and with users, designers and other experts from all over the world. The GID programme urges its participants to seek and create their own answer to this question. Like anthropologist Appadurai [17], they understand the global partly through experiencing and examining the local. Appadurai notes that, when considered this way, “locality itself was a creation that required effort, imagination, deliberation, and persistence, and that it was quite the opposite of a default state or condition, ... that the local was as much of a deliberate human construction as the global, and that the differences were differences of scale, texture, volatility, and participation, rather than of kind” [17, p.254]. If a designer is able to ‘read’ these differences, and the motivations and processes by which people are designing their own locality then, better yet, explore and understand them, she may be well equipped to ‘write’ culture that is in tune with the local context for which it is designed. To facilitate this reading, students are urged to seek out “unexpected challenges, confirmations, elaborations and unsettlings that result from encounter” through which knowledge comes into its own, though “always fragmentary, partial and provisional” [18 p2].

Combined with taught courses in host institutions, such encounters are the essential element of the immersive approach at the heart of the programme. Adamson et al write as historians of global design, yet this phrase is particularly resonant here, perfectly summing up up how students’ experiences in New York and Tokyo become ‘encounters’ with people, places and moments that stimulate and inform their growth as designers. Students themselves report strong bonds formed through these encounters, bonds with local communities (people and places) and of course among themselves and their international peers.

3 CROSS-CULTURAL INNOVATIONS

Through exploration and immersion in local community, students are encouraged to bring cross-cultural influences and perspectives to issues of their choosing, resulting in many project outcomes. Two brief examples are presented here.

3.1 Engage

As a response to the brief of ‘Design for Your Future Selves’, one team chose to address the stigma surrounding mental health among elders, in which they were challenged to understand the contrasting approaches that different countries, cultures and governments take to the treatment of people as they age. Field research in senior centres in New York and with several senior-focused NGOs resulted in the first design proposal, the Engage Toolkit (Figure 1). The toolkit contains a set of prompt activities designed to enable senior centre members to engage in open dialogue about mental health, through sharing perceptions, experiences and worries, in order to promote a culture of empathy, understanding, and free of stigma.



Figure 1: Engage Toolkit, by Daniel Coppen, Ralf Josef, Hermione Townsend, Florencia Sepulveda Camposano; photograph, Daniel Coppen, New York, 2015

The project was later taken to Tokyo, Japan, where the concept was tested within Keio University. After working closely with their Japanese student peers and consulting with Professor Junko Kitanaka, a Medical Anthropologist at Keio University and author of Depression in Japan [19], to better understand the cultural setting, the students decided that it would be more appropriate in the Japanese context to work with college students.

Based on the insights and experiences that came out of the research and user testing in Japan, the second iteration was developed into the Engage Workshop (Figure 2), introducing physical prompts and fictional scenarios and personae to facilitate and structure discussions. This key difference was informed by direct experience of Japanese culture: by centring the discussion around fictional scenarios and personae, as opposed to participants’ own experiences, they feel safe and free to talk openly in an atmosphere of confidentiality, sensitivity and respect. This allows them to develop the skills to discuss sensitive but necessary topics, somewhat taboo in Japan, without feeling pressured to share personal experiences which may require a more specialised approach, or support from a mental health professional.



Figure 2: Engage Workshop, by Daniel Coppen, Ralf Josef, Hermione Townsend, Florencia Sepulveda Camposano; photographs, Daniel Coppen, Tokyo, 2016

This project was a very striking way for the students to appreciate the importance of empathy and understanding cultural bias in the cross-cultural design process. Their assumptions, whether cultural, social or personal, were challenged at every stage of the process, as they came across legal, social, logistical, cultural and ethical challenges that were embedded in systems and ways of being that were unfamiliar to them. Collaboration with experts and peers locally was a crucial part of navigating the process of designing for a different cultural context, and the students have remained in contact with many of the people that they worked with in Japan.

3.2 Kochi Kids Welcome Box

As part of a two week ‘cultural immersion’ field trip to rural southern Japan, students were challenged to conceive ways to encourage urban Japanese and foreigners to move to rural communities, to reduce the depopulation suffered by many villages. Several students found the experience powerfully moving, and expressed a strong desire to go back after their studies.

One team noted that Western children who leave their home culture for Japan often face a sudden culture shock, which can be very disruptive to their development and education, and is off-putting for parents considering such a move. The students proposed concepts that drew on their experiences as outsiders in Japan, on secondary research into social challenges faced by migrant children, and on informal field tests on the streets of Kochi City, using sketch model prototypes. They proposed a service that would help parents prepare their child by easing the transition, gradually exposing her to hybridised elements of Japanese culture – such as food, stories, playground songs and other customs – over several months. Examples include a chopstick training game, a slipper store (to instil the habit of wearing correct footwear in and outside the home), and taste transition recipes for pasta ‘sushi’ (Figure 3).

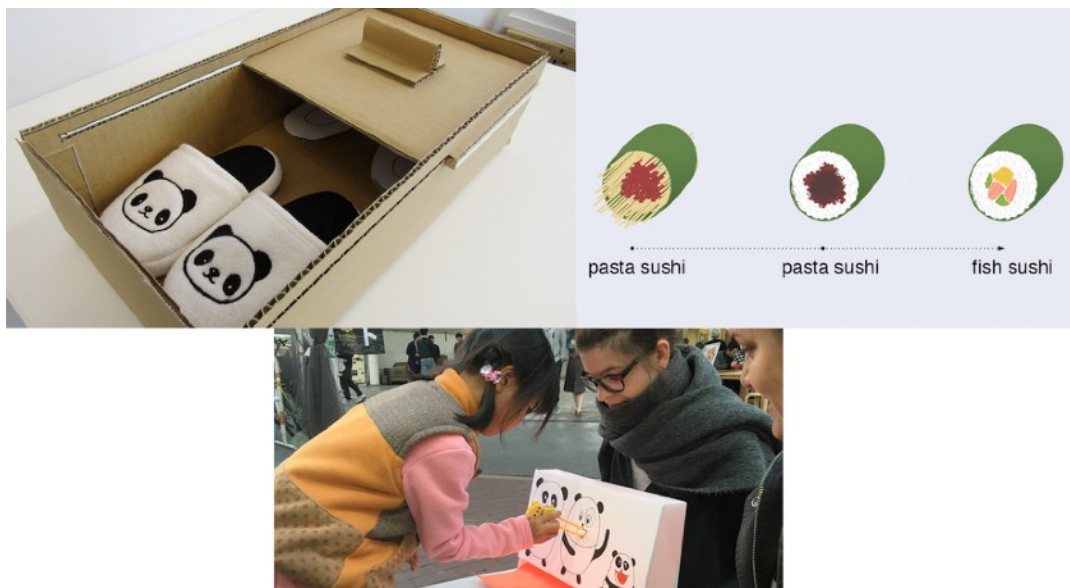


Figure 3: Slipper store, food transition recipe, chopsticks game by Arthur Carabott, Svenja Richter, Florencia Sepulveda Camposano; photos by Arthur Carabott.

4 STUDENT REFLECTIONS

The following quotations demonstrate the impact and strength of feeling among present students and alumni, and their sense of community arising from having participated in this journey:

4.1 Personal inspiration and influence

For some, there were key people whose influence lives on through direct contact, giving on-going support and inspiration for current projects, or as treasured memories.

“I hope to use my time in Japan in the Spring as an opportunity to finally test out the Engage workshop prototype with the demographic it was actually designed for.” DC

“There was one teacher [in USA] who was one of a handful of really special teachers I’ve had. Although he was our drawing teacher, I always describe him as someone who was teaching us about life, through drawing. I was really sad to hear that he passed away last year.” AC

“[The course] has given me so many international connections, friendships, and perspectives. After my exposure to so many design perspectives and future-casting projects through the program, I have become deeply interested in the social impact of consumer technology design. The program has created the foundation for a growing international network of creative technologists and designers. I feel so lucky to have had the opportunity to meet so many intelligent forward thinking minds.” RF

“The teaching in USA was completely different from what I was familiar with. I follow some of the frameworks they shared with me even today and make sure I’m in touch with them so that they’re aware of what I’m up to.” SM

4.2 Global citizens

Students speak of feeling ‘at home anywhere’, being ‘global citizens’, and are casually confident about the prospect of a job or career that takes them back to the countries where they studied, or to others. Some have made valuable professional connections, others plan to work with their peers when they graduate from their respective courses.

“I definitely plan to visit NYC before the [other] cohort graduates. Also have some career ambitions in the states, definitely bolstered by my time in NYC, and my internship in LA.” AC

“During my time in Japan I met a game developer... I’ve found him to be a very interesting and inspirational person to talk to and have kept in contact with him to get feedback on my project, and hope to visit his studio again in the future. He’s a particularly valuable contact to have for me mainly because he has insight into the game developer scene, which due to its confidential nature is quite tricky to enter, especially in Japan.” DC.

“Now I work with clients in Japan, US, UK and EU, while managing Spanish employees and contributing to academia in Imperial College. Juggling time zones and currencies and identities feel almost natural.” EG

“I hope to return to Japan in the Spring to meet again with the tutors there and explore future possibilities and collaborations, as well as of course seeing the other students we met during our time there and visiting studios such as Mizuguchi’s.” DC

“My bonds with students [from the other countries] were strengthened when I had the privilege of exhibiting at Dubai Design Week Global Grad Show, where I reunited with great friends, and I would be honoured to work with them in the future.” RF

4.3 Global Social Network

Of course, maintaining contact around the world is easier than it’s ever been, through digital social media, especially currently with Facebook and Instagram:

“Largely thanks to social media, I’m still very aware of what the students we shared studios with are up to, and occasionally chat to. Instagram is hugely popular for sharing work, and people will often comment on other’s work and successes both there and on Facebook.” AC

“I still keep in touch with one of the tutors [in Japan] over Facebook and he has been very useful in helping me think about my next steps with the course and how I could potentially be involved there in the future. It’s great to have established a connection with such an institution and know that I have a place I could turn to when considering future opportunities.” DC

CONCLUSIONS

By experiencing design education in multiple cultures, students develop a strong sense of the most pressing global challenges that transcend national borders, as well as the cultural awareness and understanding that these same challenges will have different implications in different cultures, and will therefore require locally relevant and appropriate approaches and solutions.

While not a core aim of the Programme, the emergence of such a strong community through collaborating with their peers in different locations, and the lasting relationships formed, both personal and professional, have proved enormously valued by the students. This will only increase, as scheduling changes now mean that whereas in past years, participating students from partner institutions met only rarely, this year students co-locate for several months in the cycle, which fosters a spirit of a global community and transnational collaboration in their work from day one.

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