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Original Citation

McCullagh, Joseph Felix, Jones, Carol and Watson, Yvonne (2007) Developing sustainable pedagogic strategies for the international and cultural aspects of learning in art and design post-graduate education. In: Creativity or Conformity? Building Cultures of Creativity in Higher Education, 8th - 10th January 2007, University of Wales Institute, Cardiff. (Unpublished)

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Creativity or Conformity? Building Cultures of Creativity in Higher Education

A conference organised by the University of Wales Institute, Cardiff in collaboration with the Higher Education Academy

Cardiff January 8-10 2007

Developing sustainable pedagogic strategies for the international and cultural aspects of learning in art and design post-graduate education

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Abstract

This paper offers practical and theoretical insights into developing sustainable pedagogic strategies for the international and cultural aspects of learning in art and design post-graduate education. It builds on current research by the authors in tackling core cultural issues, 'we want to address the complex issues of heterogeneity as opposed to the cultural homogenisation of students and help us all grow.' ((Jones, McCullagh, Watson, 2006).

Issues explored:
- 'translating' cultural learning styles with students from a non-Western education background
- integrating/assimilating/enriching the learning mix of domestic and overseas students
- helping students re-draw their own 'identity map' from an intra cultural perspective, using the dynamics of mix-culture groups.
- liberating students through cross-cultural learning

- enabling students to become 'future ready' in their own understanding of sustainable issues
- dealing with the attendant language and comprehension problems in mixed cultural groups

We are also keen to raise the professional aspects of teaching. To review the history of the art schools in the UK and in one sense, to try and recapture the communal goal, which aimed to improve the manufacturing base, the cultural tastes of a nation, but crucially to re-address this in International terms. (Ewart in Jones, 1996).

Keywords: cross-cultural, global, pedagogy, practice & sustainability

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Culture

We realize that when artistic, cultural and pedagogical values in one culture are inappropriate to another; students question knowledge or challenge the teacher's view, feeling dislocated and devalued in a system where they have made significant personal and economic investment. We became aware that our notions of 'preferred practice and knowledge' came from our own 'mental programmes' (Hofstede, 2005, p. 3) and should not be used to negate the 'world view' of students from other cultures, but rather, they should be acknowledged, understood, then defined clearly as equal; but ultimately different.

How does cultural difference inform our teaching? How do we expand our understanding and knowledge of different culture's artistic practices, learning and teaching styles? Do we work to create a homogenized, heterogeneous, or a blended educational culture? Do we aim to produce a melting pot of combined cultural skills and knowledge at the service of global corporate industries? (Tomlinson, 1999).

Globalization

Our educational practices cannot ignore the ways global flows of trade and labour, wealth and economy, information and ideas, have affected and continue to impact at pace on our social structures, nation states and institutions. (Jones, McCullagh, Watson, 2006). The growth of a corporate culture alongside global consumerism transforms the notion of human cultural activity and aesthetics, and we want to explore what this means for our art and design students who have economic, political and cultural agendas behind their desires for learning and development. They indicate a seismic shift in human cultural life in a global arena containing new and more complex definitions of cultural identity. (Apple, Kenway, Singh (eds), 2005). We begin to understand that culture cross-cultural issues are crucial elements in a transnational educational context, and how it should be realized in curriculum design, content, teaching and learning. (Nisbett, 2005)

We will now discuss evaluations of two case studies, which highlight the diverse issues of postgraduate cross-cultural education.

Case study 1

Josephine's master's degree was funded by the Ghanaian government. This case study highlights a number of critical cross-cultural 'design' issues particularly when working with a student from the African continent.

- Educational differences were found in relation to approaching a design process/development journey, and the problem solving required. The traditional design approach from a European perspective was openly challenged/questioned when confronted with the student's own indigenous design approach.

- Acknowledgement of the presence of differing cultural and aesthetic imperatives and the implications involved when mapping into an established Eurocentric design model.

- When an international student arrives in the Western art and design-learning space, the perception of their design and cognitive skills is often judged in negative terms. Difference is often perceived as weakness, i.e. lack of formal mark-making skills.

Case study 2

The second study is a cross-cultural, cross-disciplinary group project. Students question collectively their own role in society and their respective needs. It is based on Malsow's and Hannes Meyer's hierarchy of needs. Students explore 'needs' in relation to art and design, industry, commerce, culture and society. They question, what is the primary motivation for design social, global, multi-cultural, cultural, economic etc and why? Commonalities were expressed in relation to family values/traditions, socio-cultural traditions, religion, self-esteem, personal values, security, identity, individuality community and well-being. Groups were interested in the notion of how cultures/individuals put their 'mark' down in the world, and how cross-cultural connections are made, territory claimed, and environments created, and how memory and reflections shape an understanding of spaces.

The project addresses culture at its core. It enables the students to discuss acculturation, culture shock, the meaning of culture and cultural sustainability. To quote Fons Trompenaars 'a fish only discovers its need for water when it is no longer in it. Our own culture is like water to a fish. It sustains us. We live and breathe through it. What one culture may regard as essential, a certain level of material wealth for example, may not be so vital to other cultures. (Trompenaars, 2003, p. 20)

The project can be mapped onto the model of culture developed by Trompenaars. He uses the metaphor of an onion to describe layers of culture. (Trompenaars, 2003, p. 22) The outer 'explicit' cultural layers are more visible and the easiest to alter, the inner 'implicit' layers determine our cultural assumptions which are hidden and are the most difficult to change. (Also see the work of Hofstede where his 'onion' metaphor is symbol, hero, ritual and values, 2005). Student discussions exemplified the explicit cultural differences. Groups strove to find norms and values through to the challenging of basic implicit assumptions. As

educators we try to understand and identify our own learning cultural environments through comparing what is happening in each respective layer 'culture is not static and we believe that cultures 'dance' from one preferred end to the opposite and back'. (Trompenaars, 2003, p. 27)

Cross-cultural strategies

If we are to develop a further understanding we have to develop adaptable cross-cultural pedagogic strategies. The research identified the following main points, which offer useful practical points based on a humanistic student-centred approach.

- Recognise cultural differences, be culturally sensitive, and as an organization develop an on-going practice/strategy
- Respect cultural diversity
- Understand, respect behaviours and values that are different to our own. The behaviour may appear to be different but functionally it is the same, simply a different approach.
- Try to understand what the student is 'actually' trying to do
- Try to develop a shared meaning and understanding
- Allow students to express their own cultural diversity and discuss the dominant culture and reconcile differences
- Discuss norms, values and basic assumptions (Trompenaars, 2003)
- Be aware of 'how we behave'
- Recognise and discuss alternative learning styles
- Develop a learning experience that is not simply about the research but allows for students to experience culture
- Discuss cultural stereotypes
- Be aware of language sensibilities
- Offer a broader range of examples to illustrate concepts, which are global and not culturally biased.

As students engage in postgraduate study they arrive at a new consciousness of their own cultural identity and subsequently research work is enhanced through this open social environment. They form global understandings and their basic assumptions (Trompenaars, 2003) are challenged leading ultimately to life changing experiences. The ma experience is experiential and is not an elitist finishing school, perpetuating the old narrow idea of culture being a 'refinement'. This paradigmatic change is uncomfortable for educators to comprehend and it must be challenged for sustainable global futures. Hofstede offers useful cultural advice 'the basic skill for surviving in a multicultural world…is understanding first one's own cultural values (and that is why one needs a cultural identity of one's own) and next the cultural values of the others with whom one has to co-operate.' (Hofstede, 2005, p. 367)

Conclusion

Clearly, staff and students need to re-position themselves and be reminded that 'the development of a culturally sensitive learning environment should be viewed as a shared responsibility amongst teachers, developers, administrators and learners' which involves consultation of participants to ensure a rich and purposeful model is being developed'. (Goodear, 2001, p. 13) This is both an opportunity and necessity in enabling UK and international students to proactively learn and culturally liberate themselves and subsequently develop invaluable transferable skills in a global

economy. To conclude, the quote from Goodear highlights the danger if we are not proactive in developing sustainable pedagogies 'the sanitizing of cultural differences has the potential to limit the educational opportunities that can be found in culturally diverse learning environments'. (Goodear, 2001, p5)

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