

IMPLEMENTING INTERNATIONALISATION INTO DESIGN EDUCATION

Stephen Trathen. School of Design and Architecture, University of Canberra

ABSTRACT

This paper argues for an approach to internationalisation that goes beyond attracting international full fee paying students and conducting domestic programs off-shore, to also include the internationalisation of the design education curriculum. This approach is being incorporated in Industrial Design at the University of Canberra, and two examples are considered here. The first is a project/problem-based approach drawing upon the cultural diversity of heritage both of international students in the course and of Australian students. The second details the benefits of the vibrant international exchange program within the design course, including positive learning experiences and benefits to students and teaching staff alike. These two examples demonstrate a positive internationalisation of the design student experience and curriculum and the importance of maintaining such components within a design course. As is well recognised, Australia can ill afford to be an inward looking and isolated state, and internationalisation brings many benefits. However, in the context of budget reductions, the challenge is to ensure sufficient resources to maximise these benefits.

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In some university circles the topic of internationalisation is considered to be one of two things; either attracting and dealing with international full fee paying students or conducting financially successful off-shore offerings of domestic programs. These are both important avenues for internationalisation for certain areas of universities and their financial benefits are well understood. However an over-emphasis on these aspects risks underestimating other possible and important benefits of bringing internationalisation to the experience of university students and staff.

Racism, and its accompanying cultural ignorance, fear and misunderstanding, can be combated by efforts towards internationalisation of the curriculum. The recognition of the importance of such cross-cultural sharing of understanding is not new. As outlined by Murphy (2003). The post-WWII era, with the stresses of the Cold War, emphasised this importance, and the belief that greater understandings of our neighbours in the global village could help avoid future conflicts. With the cold war now replaced with the war on terror, the need for understanding is just as urgent. If we accept the definition of internationalisation as 'A preparation for life in the global community through greater understanding and respect for other cultures' (Curtain University cited in Pearson, 1999), the exposure of students to internationalisation must form an integral part of their university experience. This is reflected in the current strategic goals for the University of Canberra, which state that 'The university aims to provide an international experience for its community characterised by reciprocal and responsive understanding, global citizenship and on going learning and improvement.' (University of Canberra, 2004)

Given this challenge, how can we expose design students to a curriculum or experience that may impart these ideals? Two possible ways are discussed below. First, I outline a project/problem-based approach utilising not only international students that might be in the course but also by tapping into the cultural diversity of heritage within Australian students. An example project is detailed demonstrating method and results.

Second year Industrial Design students (of a four year course) at the University of Canberra's School of Design and Architecture were engaged in a project to design a portable barbeque. The class consisted of 33 students between the ages of 18 and 30, with two industrial design staff working with the students and facilitating the project. The stated aims of the project were based around the students gaining an understanding of sand-casting as a means of production, and, at face value, could appear fairly innocuous and traditional. However, as the project progressed, an international and cross-cultural experience emerged.

The students were asked to select a country, race or culture for research on which to base their design for the portable barbeque. This involved the role of ritual in food preparation and consumption, its cultural, social and religious importance, and a study of relevant diet and eating patterns and the role of cooking with fire within the selected culture. This first step was done with some group work and discussion in class to clarify requirements from the next step, being the compilation of two dimensional collage mood boards.

The students researched their selected country or culture not only through written and published material, but also through interviewing family about their own experiences and knowledge of their particular heritage. Students presented their collages and background information regarding their selected topic to their peers and staff.

The next stage of the project process was based around less formal learning surroundings, in a social situation of a barbeque. Students were asked to come prepared with various foods and traditional cooking methods from the various cultures they had investigated. They also had the opportunity to experience in an informal context some of the social customs related to food preparation and consumption from students with close links to particular cultures.

The number of students who chose a culture linked to their personal heritage was unexpectedly high, and reflected a diversity of cultural backgrounds not necessarily obvious from day-to-day dealings with the students. This diversity was foreshadowed in the presentation of the mood boards, but was even more pronounced in the informal setting of the project barbeque. This became an important factor in the success of the project not only from a method of inspiring concept designs but also from an internationalisation perspective.

For example, a previously reserved overseas student arrived at the project barbecue with a traditional dish and presented this to the class. He explained its cultural and ritual background, and method of preparation and demonstrated appropriate cooking methods. This was an important stage in this individual's development with the student and staff cohort and encouraged the group to get to know each other a little better. This interaction, if only in a small part, brought about a better understanding and respect for other cultures and the students from these cultures. The theme of cultural exploration within a set design project has existed in the industrial design curriculum in some form or other for approximately ten years and has been applied to food related products but the cooking and barbeque project seems to have worked most effectively.

The overall standard of the final design results was excellent, with students' work developing a range of varied portable cooking devices based on sand casting technology and inspired by cultural exploration. This method has proven to be beneficial in the inspirational development of new products. The less tangible results have been an increased awareness of other cultures, sympathies to understanding design and design for a varied population internationally and

within varied national backgrounds within Australian society. The benefits of internationalisation of engineering design students in the U.S.A. have been identified as including; 'considering cultural differences as design constraints in the design process' and 'developing products more capable of penetrating markets in different cultures' (Bryden, Hallina and Pinnel, 2002), and this is directly relevant to the industrial design profession.

The second aspect of internationalisation and Industrial Design details the international exchange program offered to design students at the University of Canberra, which provides positive learning experiences and benefits to students and teaching staff alike.

The student exchange program is particularly strong in the School of Design and Architecture and has a relatively long history of providing opportunities for students to study abroad or for overseas exchange students to come and study in Australia at the University of Canberra. In more recent years, this program has become stronger and better supported by the University, staff and students. With the advent of a centrally controlled administration of the exchange and study abroad programs within the University, the number of students going on exchange and campuses available has increased. The University has a balanced program of students in and students out.

The concept of exchange students is not new, but is especially valuable in the context of internationalisation in design education. The opportunity for design students to travel and study overseas in another country and culture seems to be accepted and in fact promoted in comparison to other disciplines, where it can be seen as a hindrance or meaning that the student or overseas course may not meet local accreditation standards.

Design students who may not have a grasp of the host nation's language often do well in spite of this. This reflects the capacity of design to bridge language and cultural barriers. As an international language, design concepts can be communicated through drawing and sketching, computer generated models or actual models and prototypes. The universality of the language of design does not mean students adapt to a new country without any problems at all, but the University provides a great deal of support before students leave, to prepare them for the experience. Briefing and debriefing processes with students cover issues of culture shock and cultural adaptation, and include feedback from students who have already experienced international exchange. Such feedback includes '...there is the real experience, the time that you really get into the culture and understand the customs and behaviours. The place becomes home. This is the time you remember best and treasure always' (Donaldson, 2004, p.23)

The exchange students we have come to Industrial Design from other countries offer an insight to both their country's culture but also issues of design and design education. Industrial design is a truly international profession where students learn from and, rightly or wrongly, tend to idealise overseas design and designers. Many students view the opportunity to travel and experience international design as a necessary part of their design education. It may not happen as an undergraduate design student but the for Industrial Design students opportunities and arrangements exist in Italy, Spain, France, Finland, Norway, North America and Mexico with more being considered. The challenge is to

encourage students to travel on exchange to these countries and for the universities to establish links with institutions in these areas.

Industrial Design students are generally given the opportunity to go on exchange in their second semester of their third and penultimate year. Not all students who apply or are accepted are necessarily considered the best students in a particular cohort, and it is important to note that all academic levels of students can benefit from the experience of an international exchange.

These benefits extend beyond the content of what is learned overseas, to the experience of how it is learned. Exchange students benefit from experiencing different and varied ways of learning particularly in the context of the country or culture in which they are immersed. Equally overseas exchange students that come to Australia bring information with them about how they learn, which can be shared with students and staff alike in both formal and informal settings.

Design students often have the advantage in that their work can be demonstrated in an open and public forum. Unlike some subject areas where the assessable pieces may be an essay or report only read by the tutor or lecturer, design students are often required to present their work to peers and staff at various stages of the design process. Thus different approaches to a problem are more evident to the entire group in both skills and methodology.

Overseas students can see where they and Australia sit in terms of design and design education. They gain confidence and experience, and are encouraged to not only do well in their academic pursuits but also to travel and immerse themselves in the culture of their host nation. The personal benefits they derive from the experience may not necessarily be immediately apparent, but often are. As lecturers, we see the impact of an overseas exchange on a student's work on their return. While some perspectives are obvious immediately, other influences and experiences may take some time to be told and demonstrated. A successful exchange program can be a draw card to prospective students, and encourage them to consider a design program. Numerous students inquire about the exchange program prior to entering the industrial design course, and many of these have gone on to travel and study overseas as part of the UC exchange program.

Both the examples described above have demonstrated possible ways of implementing internationalisation into design education and the benefits for doing so. These benefits go to 'creating a culture of inclusivity in the classroom' dealing with racism proactively by managing cultural diversity and valuing international student contributions' (Dean, 2004). They represent small but significant steps in building an introduction to international knowledge and understanding of other countries and their peoples. But these programs require interested and dedicated staff, both academic and general, to support the students, so all can reap the benefits. In era of reduced staff student contact time, limited resources and competing priorities the challenge is integrating internationalisation in its fullest sense throughout the academic experience. At stake is the need to expose and challenge students to and by cultural diversity, as it is through this process they may not only become informed and better designers, but builds opportunities to become global citizens who have

an understanding of the diversity of peoples and cultures they are a part of, and for whom they design.

Stephen Trathen is the Discipline Head of Industrial Design at the University of Canberra. ACT 2601. He has 10 years experience in tertiary design education after 11 years in industrial design practice. He has a Degree in Industrial Design, a Grad Dip in Ergonomics and a Masters of Applied Science by research where he investigated the nexus between consumers interaction with products and various stages of the pre purchase decision making process and the various influences of aesthetic and usability attributes.

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