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# Teaching Cross-cultural Design in North America

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## ABSTRACT

Over the past couple of decades, North Americans have found themselves living in an increasingly culturally and ethnically diverse society. In response to this explosive growth in diversity, communication and creative industries must become more sensitive to their target audiences. Henry Steiner and Ken Haas's book *Cross-cultural Design: Communicating in the Global Marketplace*, published in 1995, is one of the earliest graphic design books to address the topic of cross-cultural issues in visual communication.

This paper carries on the spirit of "cross-cultural design" by exploring its applications in teaching at the university level. Using case studies of York University design students' coursework and a workshop for graphic designers, "Design and Cultural Roots," held at the University and College Designers Association (UCDA) Annual Conference in Toronto in October 2007, this study examines the issues of teaching cross-cultural design in North America. Analysis will be made to compare the work by York's students with the exercise done by Caucasian-American participants in the workshop. This study

contributes to the understanding of teaching cultural roots in visual communication design.

What we now term "globalization" or "internationalization" has predominately been a development in one direction, from the developed Western countries to the rest of the world. Not until recent decades have we begun to see this one-way flow of communication begin to change in North America. Asian cultures (e.g.: Japanese, Chinese, Thai, and Vietnamese) are becoming more visible through various channels ranging from restaurants to movies, and among them, the Chinese culture has generated the most attention because of the economic opportunities that China now offers the rest of the world.

With North American societies becoming increasingly diverse, images and representations of ethnic minorities are appearing in all venues and walks of life, especially in the big cities such as New York City, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Vancouver and Toronto. In a culturally diverse environment, the communication and creative industries must become more sensitive to their target audiences. In the visual communication field, the organization American Institute of Graphic Arts (AIGA) began a "cross-cultural design" thread on their website a couple of years ago. Thread topics range from increasing graphic designers' cultural awareness to the pedagogical issues involved in teaching cross-cultural design (AIGA 2007). Henry Steiner and Ken Haas's (1995) book, entitled *Cross-cultural Design: Communicating in the Global Marketplace*, published in 1995, is one of the earliest graphic design books to address the topic of culture in visual communication in an East/West context.

In their book, Steiner and Haas (1995) gave an outline of tools and methods used in creating "cross-cultural design" for visual messages by mixing and integrating contents and elements from different cultures. Henry Steiner graduated from Art and Architecture School of Yale University with an MFA in Graphic Design in 1957. He worked in Paris and New York on various graphic design jobs before arriving in Hong Kong in 1961 and setting up his company, Graphic Communication

Limited, in 1964. Steiner is the first designer based in Hong Kong to receive international attention and recognition, and is known as the Father of Graphic Design in Hong Kong (Steiner, 1997). In his book, Steiner shared his more than three decades of experience working in Hong Kong, a society founded upon traditional Chinese heritage and yet never short of external influence from overseas, including British, European, American and Japanese.

Steiner's contributions to graphic design history and development cannot be understated and, even more importantly, he has added a new dimension of visual languages in modern Chinese design history after the 1930's Shanghai style. His impact is not limited to modern Chinese design history, but is also part of the "cross-cultural design" creative approach in the global context.

By examining issues of teaching "cross-cultural design" in North America, this paper would like to continue down this same path toward the development of cross-cultural design pedagogy. It examines student coursework containing cultural themes, analyzing the students' interpretations of cultural symbols and reflections on their understanding of the culture that they have depicted in their work. Also, a case study is included of the design for the workshop "Design and Cultural Roots," held at the University and College Designers Association (UCDA) Annual Conference in Toronto in October 2007, in which a majority of the participants were Caucasian-American (UCDA, 2007). This paper will report on the response and summary of this work.

Further study will be undertaken to compare the work by York's students with the exercise done by Caucasian-American participants in the UCDA workshop. By making a conscious effort to integrate different cultural materials into design education, this study contributes to the understanding of teaching cultural roots in visual communication design.

Canada has a strong tradition of embracing cultural diversity, with two official languages (English and French) and special preserved regions all over the country honouring the culture of the First Nation

Aboriginals. Toronto is a city renowned for its cultural diversity, with the 2001 Census reporting that there are 64 first languages being spoken in the city. This diversity provides a perfect environment to study the needs of cross-cultural design. In addition, York University boasts a very ethnically diverse campus and design program, and the University's policy is to honor and encourage diversity through events including its "celebrate diversity" campaign. A four-day event, Multicultural Week, is held annually in the first week of February, and every year about 60 different student associations, ranging from the Aboriginal Students Association, the Sri-Lankan Student Alliance to the Russian Students Federation, take part in the event. This event is an enduring symbol of York's celebration of multiculturalism (York University, 2007).

Within the environment of York University, the Bachelor Honours Degree in Design (BDes Hons) program, offered jointly by York's Department of Design and Sheridan College's School of Animation, is able to attract and accommodate students of diverse ethnic background. The 443 students enrolled full-time for the school year 2007/08 reflect the cultural diversity of both the University and Toronto.

Being aware of the cultural diversity of the student body, the university and the city, course directors in the BDes Hons program are careful to facilitate students with different cultural interests by providing options in course projects. For example, a 1000-level course, *Typography 2*, includes a project which offers several options on the topic of ancient civilizations, including Native American pictographs, Mayan hieroglyphics, Chinese ideograms, Roman capitals, Arabic calligraphy, early Hebrew calligraphic forms, and Gothic textura. Students are required to summarize their findings in a survey report of approximately 250 words and should use the text in their poster designs.

In *Communication Design 2*, a course at the 3000 level, one major project requires students to design a promotional campaign for a festival. The project must incorporate English and at least one other language in the design, and students are free to choose their

themes from an existing festival in Toronto or to create their own. Festival themes reflecting a wide variety of tastes have been chosen, including DigiFest, Jazz Festival, Toronto International Festival, Canada Hip Hop Festival, Ottawa International Animation Festival, and so on. Interestingly, students with Asian ancestry are generally more interested than non-Asian students in selecting a festival with an Asian theme, such as Toronto KiteFest for the Korean community, Dragon Boat Festival, Chinese Lantern Festival, and Powell Street Festival (Japanese). It's understandable that students with Asian ancestry links might see this assignment as an opportunity to learn more about their cultural heritage. At the same time, other students can also learn about cultures that they are not familiar with.

The creative directions of cross-cultural design, as shown by Henry Steiner (1995) in his book, include iconography, typography, symbolism, ideography and split image. It is quite rare to find either instructors or students who are aware of this broad range of possibilities in cross-cultural design. The design directions taken by the students in this study are mainly at the level of using cultural themes and icons in their creations, rather than thinking at a deeper level about the environment that they are living in and grew up with.

Most of the students, as seen in the Chinese Lantern Festival by Michelle Lee and Lillian Lau, and Jessica Lee's Dragon Boat Festival, interpreted the theme of their festival in a literal way. Although Toronto is never short on visual inspiration for Chinese cultures, and those students with Chinese ethnic backgrounds do know a bit about their culture of origin, it is very difficult for them to have cultural insight and understanding equivalent to those students who grew up in the Chinese-speaking region. Not surprisingly, their cultural and visual understanding often remained at the surface level.

Other examples, such as Tony Hsu's Powell Street Festival and Ashley Lee's Toronto KiteFest, are trying to take the next step. Powell Street Festival is an annual event held in Vancouver to celebrate the arts and culture of Japanese Canadians and Asian Canadians; compared to the two previous examples, Hsu has made his best effort to study

traditional graphic arts and has successfully mimicked a design with Japanese cultural flavor. Ashley Lee's work for the Korean community in Toronto took a rather different approach. Instead of attempting to make the design look "Korean", she took a different approach by making the event non-cultural, but added a touch of Korean flavor with the inclusion of Korean language.

To employ a cross-cultural design approach, a designer frequently must have very good knowledge of both cultures. Obviously, without conscious guidance, it is very difficult for students to be able to understand the creative strategy of a cross-cultural design. In addition, studies of cross-cultural design issues are very limited and examples of good design using cultural elements are not easy to come by in North America. Materials on teaching the use of cultural elements in the arts and design are also very difficult to find.

The author (Wong 2000) published a conference paper on the investigation of Chinese graphic design theory and pedagogy in 2000. In that paper, I generalized six common creative approaches seen in the graphic design work found in the Greater China region. They are: Re-invention of Chinese Typography; Integration of Bilingual Typography; Formulating the Mixture of Eastern and Western Images; Rethinking Chinese Calligraphy and Shiumo Painting; Inspiration of Folk Arts and Popular Arts from the Past; and Appropriation of Contemporary Everyday Life Objects. This study provided the possibility of further exploration on cross-cultural design theory and teaching that theory in the classroom context in North America.

In this paper, although it is difficult to see students in Toronto who are fully able to use mature approaches in creating messages for a culturally diverse audience, we can determine the basic foundation that is required for the teaching of cross-cultural design in the global context. First, it is not only required that each student have a thorough understanding of his or her own cultural heritage and the surrounding culture, but it's also necessary to learn intercultural communication skills. The teaching of intercultural communication in the North American context has a famous six-step process, including

Break Assumptions, Empathize, Involve, Discourage Herd Mentality, Shun Insensitive Behavior, and Be Wise. These steps may seem to require only common sense to appreciate, but indeed they are an important first step for the majority of people living in North America.

Although in the past few decades North Americans have found themselves living in an increasingly ethnically diverse society, much of this diversity is still found in the big cities, and the majority of people still live in environments where they lack day-to-day interactions with people of different cultural heritage. This phenomenon is particularly common in the United States. With the following example, I would like to illustrate that cross-cultural design is still in its infancy stage, even though Steiner and Hass's book first published the concept more than a decade ago. I would also like to articulate, for the general public in North America, the importance of learning about cultures outside their country.

In October 2007, I conducted a workshop, entitled *Design and Cultural Roots*, at the University and College Designers Association Annual Conference held in Toronto. It had about 30 participants, a majority of which were Caucasian American; only three of the attendees were male. In the workshop, I introduced the participants to the relationship between graphic design and culture and followed the teaching up with a short group exercise. Participants were given the name of a country, such as Japan, China, Mexico, Thailand, India and Vietnam, and were then asked to make a list of descriptive words that they associate with the country name given. This task was followed with a question asking where the participants got their knowledge of the given country. Participants were then asked to create washroom signs (men's and women's) for a restaurant in the country whose name they were given. Due to time constraints, these washroom signs could only be presented in the idea sketches stages at the end of the workshop.

When asked about the words that participants associated with each country, each group came up with a list of at least ten words. When asked about their sources of information about that country, participants identified news stories, books, school, mass media and

friends. Many of them had never had a friend with a non-Western ethnic background. The ideas for washroom signs that they came up with can be best explained as the most common images of that given country represented in the United States.

As many of you may have personal experience with American friends, you might share my view that Asians living in Asia definitely have more knowledge on the United States, from history to Hollywood movies. Indeed, we are still living in a world where the flow of "globalization" has always been in one direction. Although we are seeing the possible future changes in the balance of influence and power, led by Japan and China, it will be difficult to break away from the global marketing and distribution infrastructure and network controlled by the United States. Thus, in order to start balancing the cultural influences in globalization, it is important for the Asian countries to be able to make use of the current world communication system and to influence the representations of Asian cultures in the United States. This will involve some very complicated issues and processes.

In the case of York's design students and the participants in the Design and Cultural Roots workshop for UCAD, it is safe to say the York students have the advantage of living in an environment where access to other cultural traditions is not challenging, while some of the workshop participants lack ready exposure to other cultures or simply have not felt the need to learn more about them.

This paper summarized two case studies on teaching cross-cultural design in Toronto. Given that the culturally and ethnically diverse environment is still in its infancy stage in North America, it will take decades for the population in that part of the world to catch up with the amount of cultural knowledge Asian people already have. Design educators could be a part of this effort by promoting cross-cultural design as a required course for students living in a globalized world.

This paper is not yet able to establish any basic framework and tools for teaching cross-cultural design due to a lack of examples and the small sample of students. However, it is possible to start by

encouraging individual students to pursue their independent projects at the senior level. The example that I have here is an independent project by a student who emigrated to Toronto when she was 13 years old. She has competency in reading Chinese. In this project, she wants to create a series of flashcards for non-Chinese readers to learn how to read and write Chinese. The project's creative direction is to integrate English and Chinese in a mixed message to communicate to a non-Chinese reader.

The study of cross-cultural design theory and pedagogy has great potential and urgently needs development. A conscious effort to embrace cross-cultural design theory can contribute to a long-term balance in the flow of globalization. This is particularly important for design students and design programs in Asia, since they are setting an example for the rest of the world to follow.

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