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Typographic diversity in early-year typography studios

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Institutions teaching graphic design (and other post-secondary programs) are increasingly relying on international students to populate and fund themselves. (Hegary, 2014) With current communication technologies and mobility of populations, audiences likewise are more likely to come from different cultures, whether as international students, or recent immigrants attending post-secondary education. Although we actively recruit students from abroad, the education we deliver is oriented towards our traditional student, someone who grew up using the English language and what we generally call the "Roman" alphabet. This paper considers the value of introducing using non-Roman writing systems in communication design courses both as exploring different ways of communicating language visually, and as a way of integrating the knowledge and culture of international students and others with differing cultural backgrounds into a graphic design education. By so doing, we can better recognize students with diverse backgrounds as holders of valuable cultural capital by making the formal and functional attributes of the scripts used to communicate language of which these students are often, by dint of their experience, expert users. At the same time, we can widen and enrichen the education of local students, who have little knowledge or understanding of other script traditions.

The practice of including those non-Roman scripts used by some of our students has three principal potential benefits. The first is to foster appreciation and recognition of, and respect for, the affordances and characteristics of non-Roman scripts, the second is to encourage experimentation with how language can be visually represented, and the third is to promote a more inclusive environment for the growing number of beginning students who, while they may be at a disadvantage in the use of the Roman script system or visual communication of the English language, have the opportunity to bring a knowledge and critical appreciation of the forms and functions of other writing systems to their fellow students, and gain confidence in bringing their own individual backgrounds, abilities and understanding into their design school experience. There is also a by-product of this last aspect, as it exemplifies an aspect of the classroom, respect for students' opinions and individuality, and the encouragement of the expression of critical thought by students that may not be a part of educational structures in some educational cultures. For example, Chinese students, who make up the majority of international students are socialized to have respect for authority and social harmony in the classroom, with little active participation from students. (Wang, Sun, Liu) Students from other educational cultures can learn that the expression of the student's opinion and knowledge is valued, which is a model of what most of us expect, or at least hope, will be a normal aspect of our classes. This is important to do as early as possible for students to fully participate in the student-centered education that is characteristic of North American art and design schools.

The teaching of graphic design in North America is largely based on European traditions, most notably the Bauhaus. Although we have evolved from the Bauhaus model of teaching craft in a master/apprentice structure in terms of the teaching of graphic design generally, those changes have not necessarily been entirely for the best. For example, the teaching of typography as a craft has been to a large degree been abandoned, while teaching its history and practice is still firmly ensconced in the

history of typography in Europe. Furthermore, we teach typographic composition and usage using almost exclusively Roman forms. and most of our historical references to typography are confined to European and North American examples.

Our focus on the alphabet as it evolved from Roman (for majuscules) and Middle Ages (for minuscule) forms may appear to make sense, because these two models are basis of the alphabet that dominates in much of the world today. The Roman alphabet is without question the dominant model in Western Europe and the Americas, as well as those parts of the world colonized by the European nations which use it. So it does make some sense to focus on the Roman alphabet, but not quite as much sense as it used to. The cultural dominance held by Western Europe and North America for much of the 19th and 20th centuries is increasingly in question. The world's population is more mobile than it has been in earlier eras, and this applies to students as much as it does to anyone else, and national and cultural boundaries have become more porous for students as well as others. Many schools in North America and Europe have not only a large and increasing number of both international students, but also permanent residents who not only do not have English as their first language, and who have cultural backgrounds that differ significantly from those of students who grew up in the country in which the schools are located. In the US, the number of international students first enrolling in post-secondary education increased by 40% between 2010 and 2016. (Lu, 2016) In many cases, one of the important cultural traditions and educational foundations of international students is the script in which they received their primary and secondary educations. Significantly, the first four sources of international students in terms of numbers in the US are China, India, Korea, and Saudi Arabia, students from all of which are likely to have received much or all their education in a non-Roman script. (IIE, 2017)

Other writing systems and alphabets have both advantages and disadvantages compared to the Roman alphabet, both as systems, and in their abilities to represent different languages. These students' knowledge and cultures can enrich the first year experience for all students. The Chinese ideographic system, as well as being visually rich, gives insight into how writing can communicate, to some degree, independently of spoken language. A familiarity with abjads, abugidas, and syllabaries gives awareness into other phoneme-based systems and how they are able to represent language, and how different languages may have greater or lesser requirements for certain features depending on the phonemes used in the language. They also afford visual possibilities that are not present in the Roman alphabet.

Invented and designed scripts, such as those of Korea as well as the Cherokee syllabary and other scripts devised to write indigenous languages, invite students to be open-minded in their approach to typographic structures and practice, and challenge the evolutionary inevitability of the descendants of ancient scripts. Clearly, looking at other scripts has benefits for local students. But widening our focus also promised benefits to the increasingly significant international component of our students, and it is reasonable to begin this at the earliest levels of typographic education.

There are two main approaches that type instructors tend to take in early year typography studio classes.

One is the consideration of type as form and element of composition. The other is looking at text, and the setting of type for the communication of language. Most programs spend time on both, though the relative emphasis is dependent on the approach of the program, and, often, the individual instructor. This dichotomy exists in some degree in typographic practice: the treatment of display type tends to be visual and compositional, while the treatment of text type is more concerned with facilitating and controlling communication of language, though in practice, these two areas overlap considerably.

In early type classes, however, these two approaches tend to be largely separated, even if the course does pay attention to both. In the context of the first approach, an assignment given frequently is to explore compositions with one or two letterforms, rotating them, perhaps cropping them, to draw attention to and gain an understanding of type forms, which may have had little attention from the student before beginning their design education. Other exercises may include adjusting the visual space between letters of a word, a significant matter in display type or manipulating the letters of a word to make the word visually resonate with its meaning. These kinds of exercises, which focus on the principal script used in our largely English-speaking communication environment, are useful, but there are good reasons include other scripts as well. Seeing, considering, and working with different scripts can give a greater appreciation of the relative function and visual characteristics of each of them. In urban settings, these scripts are often part of the public visual environment, increasing their potential relevance to all students.

Some dimensions of the other aspect of typography, that is, the treatment of text type, are more language dependent, thus less amenable to work with for those unfamiliar with the script. Nevertheless, concepts of readability and legibility can be explored, as well as the visual aspects and compositional possibilities of a script or form of script, and give insight into universal aspects of visual communication. An example is that of cursive scripts, being essentially a manifestation of the effect of the very human inclination to do things as quickly as possible, in this case writing. The concept of cursive writing or 'cursivity' may better be understood by considering other scripts in addition to the Roman. For example, students may think of text as being cursive, or not cursive, when in fact we might consider capitals modelled on Roman inscriptions being the least, and informal scripts as being the most, cursive. We can locate other forms as being intermediate. Roman minuscule forms are a reinterpretation of hurried writing of the majuscule forms, italics are more cursive in nature, but still more formal than informal scripts. Informal majuscules tend to have a cursive nature, while scripts based on 17th and 18th century cursive calligraphic forms are very formalized.

In relationship to other scripts, Arabic and Persian are structurally more cursive than the discrete Roman form of letters (though they also vary in their degrees of formality) as many characters have different forms depending on where they appear in a word. Simplified Chinese script integrates cursive forms of more complex traditional characters among several other strategies for simplification. Looking at simplified in comparison to traditional Chinese characters is an opportunity to discuss the nature of legibility and cultural change. Legibility is both a matter of physiology and culture; this kind of comparison can give students of any background insight into how legibility affects communication.

Designed, rather than evolved, scripts, such as, for example, the Korean alphabet, or Cherokee syllabics, are useful for considering how different forms of writing may best communicate different languages, and can help promote a critical understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the Roman alphabet as a method for visually representing the English language, and how the evolution of the alphabet has responded to linguistic needs.

To date, the increasing internationalization of students has had very little impact on how we teach graphic generally, and typography in particular. This focus on the Roman form may have the effect of reinforcing a Eurocentric view of visual communication, and diminishing the importance of other cultures' relationship with it. It also puts those who have grown up with a different writing system at an initial disadvantage in dealing with typography in the North American context. Bringing in the scripts that our international students are familiar with gives at least some opportunity to have an advantage.

In the fairly recent past, international students tended to enroll in programs where visual culture was less of an issue. Engineering, math, physics, and accounting are programs that have been popular, (Lu)

and while it is necessary to use the local language and the Roman alphabet in such programs, there is less of a focus on writing systems in the classroom than there is in graphic communication programs.

A greater number of international students are taking design courses, as opposed to the less cultural subjects that they have tended to pursue historically. (Lu) For example, fine and applied art students from China studying in the US increased by 214% between 2010 and 2015, (Lu) by far the highest increase in disciplines of international students. It is evident that design itself is more culturally situated than accounting or engineering. So the alienation and cultural challenges of the classroom may extend to the subject itself. But the obverse of this disadvantage is an opportunity that presents itself much more clearly than it does in the more technically-based courses that students with international backgrounds may encounter.

International students in any discipline tend to have problems of adjustment, problems which are often grouped under the term "culture shock", (Huntley, 1993) and dealing with specifically cultural matters, which the natural purview of graphic design, that shock is likely to be worse, at least in the classroom. This phenomenon of problems faced by students encountering a new learning environment in particular has also been has been described. International students face "a number of challenges including isolation, alienation, marginalization and low self-esteem." (Guo & Chase, 2011) Although they are writing about the Canadian context, Guo and Chase point out that studies in Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, and the US support this. Bringing areas in which international students are strong at least potentially could alleviate these problems.

Students who grow up and receive their primary and secondary education in a dominant monoculture such as that which characterizes the US or Canada, while they clearly have advantages in understanding and reproducing that culture, will tend to have an insulated and parochial perception of the world's cultures. A greater awareness of other scripts encourages critical thinking about how language is represented visually, both in terms of visual qualities, but also from the point of view of systems of visual communication, as well as helping them recognize and appreciate the cultural knowledge of their classmates.

Graphic design teachers do sometimes try to include other script traditions in the early years. However, they risk insensitivity or oversimplification or parody, as they focus on the visual form, ignoring underlying cultures, and largely avoiding consideration of the functional similarities and differences between scripts, as well as sometimes ignoring the expertise available in their own classes. It requires a degree of both caution and cultural sensitivity to confidently incorporate these elements in our studios.

We can avoid the above problems to some extent by asking students to take leadership roles in teaching about scripts in which they have some expertise. This makes the students' experience valuable rather than irrelevant, encourages students with western backgrounds to appreciate and respect other traditions of visual communication, as well as valuing the contributions of those students who hold knowledge of them. It also provides an opportunity for international students to recognize that personal knowledge and opinions are seen as valuable in a typical design studio. Although students from other educational cultures may be more used to a teacher-centered approach, they come to appreciate and prefer a more student-centered education. (Wong, 2004) Given that international students and those from differing educational backgrounds are in the classrooms, it is both a duty and a privilege of the typography instructor to respect and learn from them.

Conclusion

As we not only accept, but actively seek out, international students, we have a duty to support them both in and outside the classroom. It is a duty to accommodate them in terms of their wants and needs

in terms of their education. The presence of international students suggests a need to at least in some degree, to internationalize the classroom. (Guo & Chase) In terms of mitigating the adverse effects of colonization, firmly bringing teaching of graphic design into the 21st century, and making the classroom a place where international students and those from other cultures are able to operate from a position of strength, respect for those cultures is essential. In the typography class, there are both opportunities and dangers. International students bring valuable knowledge, and by making use of it rather than ignoring it, we can not only improve education for local and international students, but also help international students gain familiarity with the student-centered model that we espouse. However, at the same time, we must avoid unwelcome focus on cultural differences, which requires consideration and sensitivity. Increasing numbers of international students are part of many schools' plans, and these students require a considerable amount of support both inside and outside the classroom. We can't solve all the challenges faced by our culturally diverse students, but the typography studio is a place where we can begin to position them in a position of strength and confidence.

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