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Comparing Design Summer Schools in European and Asian Contexts

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1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Over the last 10 years the role of international, collaborative design education has grown in importance worldwide. In Asian design education contexts, universities initiate exchange programs, organize remote collaborative design projects and international design summer schools [2] [6]. In order to show the educational value of international design summer schools, this paper will evaluate the experiences of students who participated in an Asian summer school, using a model of cross-cultural collaborative design and learning derived from a qualitative analysis of participants' experiences in European design summer schools. European and Asian design summer schools will be compared in order to identify commonalities and differences between these two learning contexts. The paper will argue that collaborative, contextual design and learning based on "real-world" design problems provide a good educational practice for students, which goes beyond traditional university courses. In this context the role of collaborative, user-centered design research in Asian design education will be discussed.

1.1. Collaborative Learning and Design

Education research in the 70's and 80's found that collaborative learning increases the learners' enthusiasm and confidence, which promotes the maturity of learning-supportive social skills in a specific situation inspiring creative thinking and leading to the creation of novel knowledge. [8]. This theory maintains that knowledge is socially constructed and learning a social process, based on problem solving in the real world. These constructivist theories of learning also influenced the advancement of approaches to contextual and collaborative design. [5] Following this line of thought, modern design education places a greater interest on involving a multiplicity of stakeholders and participants in the collaborative design process. [12] Based on these contextual and user-centered traditions in learning and design, it is not unusual that the setup and implementation of design summer schools includes collaborative design and learning practices [1] [2] [6]. For example, in Europe, an interdisciplinary community of students, researchers and practitioners from computer engineering, social sciences, Human Computer Interaction (HCI), visual communication and other related disciplines gather together once a year to participate in an intensive two-week interaction design summer school [2]. In order to complete a time-bound, resource-limited interaction

design project successfully while collaborating with multicultural and multidisciplinary teams, participants experientially learn a variety of ethnographic, prototyping and interaction design methods [9], as well as teamwork skills [4]. Living with target users and facing real-world design problems, participants gain proficiency in interaction design principles despite the programme’s short duration. In addition to hands-on experiences, lectures from experienced practitioners supplement the learning process.

1.2. Cross-cultural and international design education

In international design summer schools knowledge is gained interactively through collaborative learning and design. However, research into cross-cultural communication reports that differences in the interaction styles across cultures have an enormous impact on intercultural learning and teamwork [3] [7] [11]. To investigate into this phenomenon, the author conducted an ethnographic study of cross-cultural collaborative design and learning in European design summer school contexts [10]. The findings of this study show that design summer schools promote distinct intercultural collaborative design and learning strategies. Based on the findings the author proposed a model to support cross-cultural collaborative learning and design that fosters contextual innovation, shown in Figure 1.

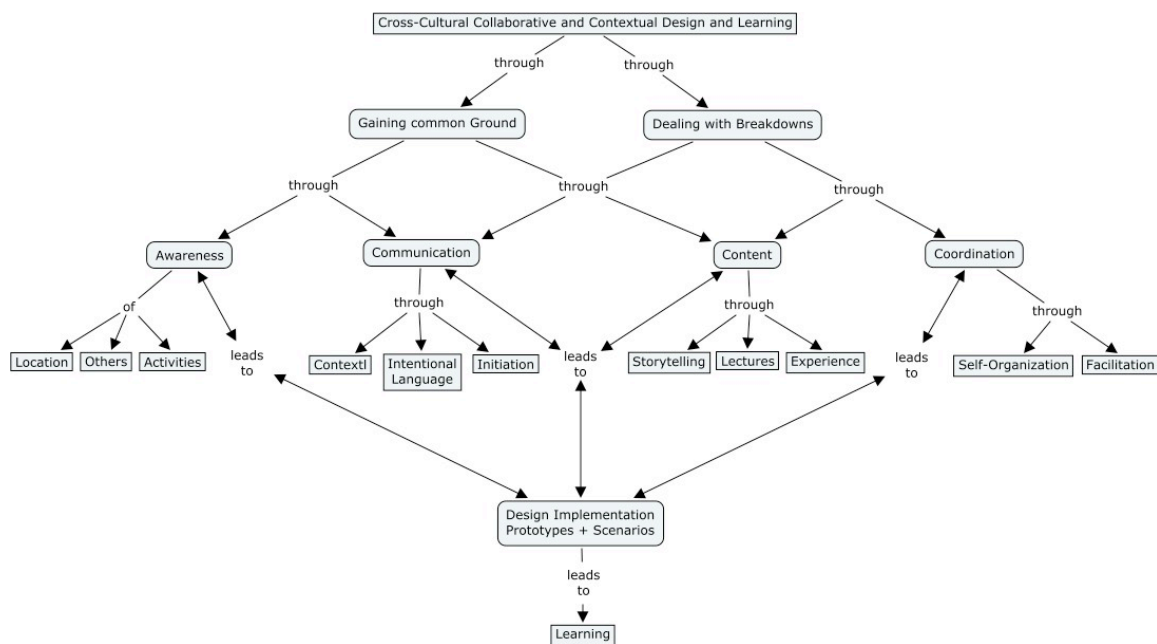


Figure 1. A model of cross-cultural collaborative design and learning for contextual design innovation

The framework proposes that teams need to gain common ground and deal with breakdowns using certain awareness, communication, coordination, content management and implementation strategies. Knowledge about the local context and characteristics and backgrounds of other team members make participants aware of action patterns within the design community. This initiates and facilitates a dialogue with fellow teammates and the local population, increases consciousness about the use of language and stimulates high contextual communication practices in collaborative design and learning. Storytelling is an important communication strategy that supports agreement on design ideas in collaboration. These contents are experienced through hands-on design experiences in the local setting and supported by lectures given by experts in the field. The team activities are coordinated mainly through

self-organization, which is fostered by a growing body of knowledge and confidence through testing design ideas in a concrete local setting. This allows decreased facilitation intensity and improves contextual learning and design innovation processes. Various implementations in the format of probes, prototypes or scenarios at different stages of the design workshop secure more awareness, inspire conversations and open up new content as well as helping the self-organization and coordination of the team's activities.

This collaborative design and learning framework was derived from successful European summer schools. In order to compare the experiences of students in a similar educational context in an Asian summer school, the author chose to conduct a qualitative evaluation of the learning experiences based on this model.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Setting

In 2005 and 2006, design summer schools in Asia were organized and hosted by the School of Design, the Hong Kong Polytechnic University in Hong Kong [1]. In contrast to the open call for participation typical in European summer schools, the Asian summer school organizers invited 5 European and Asian Universities to select 4 students each to participate in this 6 week program. Participants had design and business related study backgrounds. Approximately 30 students were divided into 5 international teams balanced in gender. On an average two tutors from the invited universities accompanied each school's delegation of students. While the European summer schools appointed atelier leaders for each team for the entire time, the tutors in Asian summer schools took roles of external advisers, gave scheduled tutorials and provided advice when need to all teams. Furthermore, in contrast to European summer schools where participants lived for 2 weeks with the target audience they designed for, the Asian workshop was conducted over a longer period of time and involved a short research field trip to the target group for whom the participants were asked to design.

2.2 Research Approach, Data Collection and Analysis

The previously proposed model for cross-cultural collaborative design and learning was adopted to perform an inductive qualitative analysis of natural observations, questionnaire answers and in-depth interviews with the participants from these Asian summer schools. In the following step, the data were viewed, sorted, coded and analyzed using TAMSAalyzerTM and GraphViz.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

To summarize the major findings, the evaluation of the experiences from the Asian summer school participants shows that students generally had a positive experience. However, a lack of awareness and transparency of activities that were planned by the organizers led to a more uncertain logistic and hierarchical learning atmosphere with which especially European students felt uncomfortable. Furthermore, while the horizontal communication within the teams was inspiring and generally satisfactory, the vertical communication with tutors and organizers was perceived as problematic at times. The summer school experience could have been enhanced through more encouragement to explore and experiment with various methods and approaches to designing, which was limited by a multiplicity of

specific project deliverables required by the design brief. This became clearer in interviews with the participants, who expressed slight dissatisfaction about the not so innovative design results. The coordination and self-organization of the international design teams was often interrupted by instructions and small additional tasks that distracted the teams internal cohesion and advancement of design ideas. Nevertheless, expert lectures were perceived as valuable and commensurate to the situated learning needs in each phase of the design project.

4. CONCLUSION

The paper will discuss above-outlined findings in more detail and illustrate how shortcomings in Asian summer schools can be overcome by learning from European summer schools. Advances of Asian summer school approaches will also be highlighted. Interviewed Asian summer school participants felt that they gained a unique international learning experience working together on a common project in and for Asia. The paper will draw lessons from the positive experiences that can inform the planning of future similar events.

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