GEOGRAPHICS: DESIGN, EDUCATION AND THE TRANSNATIONAL TERRAIN

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ABSTRACT

Using insights from an anthropologist, a sociologist, a psychologist, and a philosopher, this article explores differences in cultural experience, in behaviours, and in expectations concerning the teaching of design by a foreign teacher working with students in their homeland. The author argues that it is substantially different to teach foreign students in the United States than it is to teach them in their own country. The article focuses on the cultural difference between an American teacher and her Chinese Master's-level students in Hong Kong working within the context of a design seminar course that required original research. While the university conducts classes in English and the students' language skills are diverse, other cultural obstacles, including contrasting teaching and learning styles, present a larger challenge. The deeply established Confucian values held by the students contrast with and sometimes support the teaching and learning experience in terms of interactive communication, and inform different approaches to thinking about the research process, and project execution. Human- or user-centred approaches to design present in design processes as taught, also underscore the development of an adaptive and responsive teaching attitude. The author concludes the article by offering some suggestions for others engaged in similar learning exchanges.

Key Words: cross-cultural communication, Chinese and American cultural difference, teaching design abroad

FULL PAPER

Introduction

For twenty-five years I have taught in graduate design programs, working with Master students and Ph.D. students in three programs with different participants and orientations. My first experience was at the Rhode Island School of Design, where in those days the students were largely Western; I then moved to the Illinois Institute of Technology's Institute of Design, where a large number of students were international; and I finally concluded my intensive teaching years at Hong Kong Polytechnic University's School of Design, where most students were from Hong Kong or mainland China, and where a few Europeans and other Asians entered the mix. In the early years, I could look at a class roster and know who was American and who was foreign simply by reading their names. Today that would be impossible. While at the Institute of Design and working with the many foreign students there, I started to wonder whether the design ideas that I was teaching would translate to the students' home cultures, based upon what they learned

and experienced in the United States within that specific program. This led me to consider a complex question: How was design situated in terms of aesthetics, process, responsibilities, and cultural heritage within a given student's native land? I was surprised one day to overhear a student refer to me as European-American; clearly the students had observed the variety of Americans. While the various mixes of students within each institution created one challenge, another rose from the philosophical positioning of each program: from the first, which was more art-oriented; to the second, which was a more pragmatic functional/business-oriented program; to the third, with its strong cultural base. Together these differences caused me to reflect upon how design itself as well as teaching and learning were positioned within a global and local context. Such musing led me to question my own presumptions about design and its cultural foundations.

The question above influenced my decision to live and teach in Hong Kong for two-and-a-half years, to experience teaching design within another culture.

I argue that Chinese students studying in the United States have made a conscious choice to study and explore that culture. Those students expect to learn in a different way and under different circumstances than those that are familiar and comfortable to them. This is a different experience than that of a Chinese student in Hong Kong, learning within a congenial local environment, and being taught by an American. Within the United States Chinese students adapt to the professors and students within that context. American students are not always kind or accepting of their Chinese counterparts' potential problems with language, their reticence, or their ways of thinking. To be effective teaching in Hong Kong, it was essential that I attend to cultural differences and reconsider my expectations and the ways in which I typically had been teaching. I became caught between the local culture, my own culture, and a desire to prepare students to be competitive globally.

A quick visual flavour of location and culture follows.

Figure 1   Figure 2   Figure 3   Figure 4

Hong Kong is bilingual in Chinese (Cantonese and Mandarin) and English (figure 1). It is densely populated, largely in high-rise towers (figure 2). The Chinese respect their traditions of calligraphy and physical culture. A calligrapher in a Beijing park writes with water on the pavement (figure 3). My Tai Chi master quietly demonstrates a position for me to imitate (figure 4). Remnants of Hong Kong's colonial past

persist, such as orderly queues at bus stops, but this international city is under pressure from mainland China to conform to the larger culture.

 Theory and experience

	In contrast to what I experienced, I begin with theory. In order to deepen my understanding of cultural differences and to frame my experience, I examined theoretical insights from anthropological, sociological, psychological, and philosophical perspectives. My use of these theories, however, did not predate the teaching experience. It was the experience that stimulated the search for theory: the experience is alive, while the theory is a distillation, an abstraction of ideas. The nature of lived experience is that it unfolds unexpectedly, through reflection, returning to experience with interpretation. It is often cumulative, repetitive, and sometimes frustratingly unstable. The lived anecdotes contained within this article have the qualities just mentioned, but theory allowed me to understand each experience as more than simply a passing event.

Global theory
	The experience of moving beyond one's own culture suggests a variety of ideas, institutions, techniques, and expectations. A theoretical perspective from the anthropologist Arjun Appadurai provides a quick look at the global context in which our lives play out today. Appadurai identifies some outstanding features of modern subjectivity that include media and migration, the ways in which they meet unpredictably, and ideas about the ways in which media, as it crosses borders, supports human agency and change. The contemporary speed and scale of such transfer is commonplace today, forming a dynamic, global conception of the world and conceiving new possibilities from this world. Using a landscape metaphor, Appadurai introduces five global flows: ethnoscapes, financescapes, technoscapes, mediascapes, and ideoscapes (1997:33). For Appadurai, ethnoscapes are the diasporas motivated by safety, opportunity, and/or other issues in countries that welcome them or try to exclude them. They evolve into hybrid identities that are an amalgam of past and present cultural expectations. Financescapes include those contexts that support global capital, the connections and movement between them, the dynamic opportunities they engender, as well as the financial crises that may result. Technoscapes represent the uneven, illogical distribution of technology, with cell phone ubiquity nearly everywhere while the lack of sanitation or clean water exists side-by-side. Mediascapes are the worldwide distribution outlets for information; they can be embraced for their alternative perspectives or blocked because they challenge the statis quo, and their products can be overwhelming in scope and quantity. Ideoscapes, which include media-transmitted images, are the forums for complex ideas like freedom, rights, and representation, among other things. These five cross-cultural flows do not always function independently of one another, but interact and can clash. As an example of how the mediascape and the ideoscape come together, I can cite the example of my residence in Hong Kong, where I could access via

cable TV the British Broadcasting Corporation, Al Jazerra, evening news from the United States, local Hong Kong news, and the English-language broadcast from Beijing, providing me with the opportunity to receive a British, Arab, American, Hong Kong, and Mainland Chinese perspective on the same event. I could have gotten even more. Space, time, and cultural perspective were compressed.

What Appadurai's ideas teach the contemporary design professor and student is that there is much to learn from perspectives beyond the local or personal experience, even when that experience is already a transnational one. Many Hong Kong students have no desire to leave home and many mainland students also plan to return to their cities of origin. Yet as China becomes more sophisticated about designing and exporting its own products, these students may be called upon to design for another culture within the global context or even to address one of the many specific cultural contexts within China. In addition to my desire to help my students interact with a larger world, I brought a human- or user-centred perspective into the design process. This approach requires students to pay attention to those for whom they design by observing them, understanding their habits, and recognizing the meanings that they attach to the details of what is designed. This moves the designer beyond their own individual understanding and desire, and places them beyond their comfort zone, opening the design process to new ideas and understandings. This is fundamental to crossing cultural borders and is a primary take-away process and experience for the students regardless of whether their project addresses their neighbour, a Tibetan or Uigur, or a European.

Automatic behavior theory

In contrast to the global view that reveals the interconnected differences among us and that I have introduced as a way to explore the importance of a human-centred design process, Pierre Bourdieu, a sociologist, has theorised what he calls the 'habitus', an out-of-awareness realm of reproducible practices and dispositions. The habitus consists of that human behaviour which is done automatically, as opposed to that which is open for conscious choice or representation. My personal interest in the habitus concerns the ways in which the practices of learning and teaching are coloured by cultural difference. As Bourdieu describes it, "The habitus is this kind of practical sense for what is to be done in a given situation—what is called in sport a 'feel' for the game, that is, the art of anticipating the future of the game, which is inscribed in the present state of play" (Bourdieu, 1998:25). Habitus, or out-of-awareness dispositions, have featured in the learning behaviour of my Chinese and American students. It is the product of how they were taught—the ethos and expectations of the game of learning and its various processes.

Behavioural style, Bourdieu's habitus, is quite different between a given Chinese and a given American student. While teaching in Chicago, I discussed with my students the importance of cultural difference. Two students offered a demonstration of Chinese and American differences, with each demonstrating the other's behaviour, which made their performances more compelling. The Chinese student portrayed the American slouching in a chair, talking loudly, interacting off-topic with

another student, waving a hand to answer, and answering confidently, even aggressively. The American student portrayed the Chinese sitting up straight, attention-focused, silent, taking notes. Such different behaviours are not trivial in a teaching situation. Could the American become more restrained and the Chinese become more forthcoming? How do they learn to work together on a team? Such behavioural differences were everyday teaching/learning concerns, but in an American context.

Part of what influences the habitus within the Hong Kong/Chinese context is the deep cultural reverence for Confucius (552-479 B.C.E.), a moral philosopher known for the Way of Humanity that today integrates love and reason with the family as the foundation. It would be a mistake to underestimate the influence of Confucius, just as it would be a mistake to ignore Judeo-Christian influence within the West. The values of Confucianism are significantly different from the Enlightenment values of the modern West (Tu, 2000:264).

Table 1: Comparison of Enlightenment and Confucian values

Enlightenment values	Confucian values
- instrumental rationality	-sympathy
- liberty	- ritual
- rights consciousness	- duty consciousness
- due process of law	- due process of law
- privacy	- public spiritedness
- individualism	- group orientation

Among these values, those most apparent in teaching were the conflict between liberty and ritual and the conflict between individualism and group orientation. Within the former, liberty implied process exploration and the freedom to create, and with my own Western background I expected this. In contrast, the Chinese students wanted a set menu for their process and sought the 'right' answer. If I offered a general diagram of the design process we were engaged with, and if students found the actual process to deviate from that previously given, they became concerned. Contingency, unexpected ideas, and the ambiguity of the design process made for discomfort. The individualism and group orientation conflict caused critiques to be challenging. Students were reluctant to be critical of their peers even when I stressed the need for constructive ideas. Face-saving demands the right ritual behaviour to preserve self-esteem, and group orientation provides a focus to avoid confrontation among peers. The traditional education system that the Chinese students have experienced has largely been passive and has been based upon rote learning. Adding in other differences between our values, made for a challenging teaching situation. Somewhere between individualism and group orientation is a sympathetic place, where one can be unique, respectful of others, supportive of their needs, and speak one's mind. Some Americans and some Chinese go too far to the cultural extremes.

While in Hong Kong, I sought to learn about and experience Chinese culture from the inside, and not as a simple observer. I chose to live in Kowloon rather than the fashionable Hong Kong Island; I avoided the

ex-patriot community and became friends with the Chinese. In order to better understand Chinese culture, I took Tai Chi lessons from a Chinese master. These lessons brought into high relief some differences between Chinese and American teaching strategies. Tai Chi is a physical culture that is demonstrated by the master and imitated by the novice, much like the way that I learned to ski. There was little talk; I made a move and the master corrected my movement by adjusting whatever body position was incorrect. He never said that I was improving or that I performed a movement well. We progressed through subsequent forms; I learned more movements, but I never felt a sense of accomplishment. It felt, rather, like I was learning within a void whose structure only the master understood. In contrast to the master's system of demonstration, imitation, and correction, I teach by suggestion, critical comment, the application of analysis and alternatives, and sometimes by demonstration. I offer positive reinforcement for effective independent thinking, including design alternatives that might advance a project. I also encourage risk-taking and provide supportive feedback when warranted. My experience with the Tai Chi master demonstrated the habitus of teaching/learning, Chinese style.

Theory of East-West thinking

So far I have paired global theory with human-centred design approaches to support an understanding and use of processes that acknowledge difference, and the notion of habitus in relation to behavioural approaches and their underlying values. Difference in thinking style also figures in the teaching/learning paradigm in a cross-cultural context.

Richard Nisbett, a psychologist, has written about the ways in which Western people and Asians think differently (2003). That noted, Nisbett's analysis does not advance one way of thinking as superior to another. According to Nisbett, Americans are analytical, and they pull problems apart to better uncover possibilities, relationships, contradiction, and the principles and rules that are at play within a given situation. They like to categorize and build a synthesis from deconstructed parts. In contrast to this, Nisbett finds that Chinese are holistic, seeing relationships everywhere, and recognizing change as a dynamic flux that cannot be stabilized or controlled. Further, the Chinese are not given to rhetoric or debate; they are not concerned with contradiction or counterargument. Rhetoric, debate, and contradiction are essential thinking tools for Americans. But for Chinese, dialectical reasoning based upon principles of change, holism, and the connectedness of contradiction (that is, opposites on a continuum) brings them to the Middle Way, a balance or harmony among the elements of a situation.

Research

In a graduate design program at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University's School of Design, students had to conduct original research as a final step to completing their degree. This model for conducting research was organized on the American model, which requires

background information, a research question, a literature search, methodology, analysis, synthesis, findings, discussion, and a conclusion. This model is common worldwide; there is logic to its development. It develops a rhetoric or argument to support the work, and it runs counter to the way most Chinese think. Is there a complementary Chinese approach to research? If so, then I don't know of it. Even if I did, I doubt that I could in turn teach it, captive as I am inside my own culture of thinking.

The Chinese students whom I encountered had no personal experience with research-based practices and little experience reading research reports. This state of affairs is also common in many U.S. graduate design programs. Knowing this to be a new experience with a different cognitive flavour, I work step-by-step through the research process with the students who are beginners. Those students are successful in the stages of literature review and data gathering, yet problems arise with analysis and synthesis. As holistic thinkers, analysis does not come easy. Typically, a first draft of a research report reveals much thought, but also a confusing array of mixed data and outcomes, with all possible connections presented whether strong and useful or weak and inconsequential. While the research is present, I am personally unable to enter the holistic mindset because for me it lacks structure and clear relationships. After making comments on how to present the work and argue for it more logically, a student replied "I understand what you mean, but I need the time to digest and fix myself to it since [this] is totally different from my working habit." Unpacking the experience reveals the following differences in ways of thinking.

Table 2: Comparison of some differences in thinking between American and Chinese

American	Chinese
- analytic tradition	- holistic tradition
- logical reason	- dialectical reason
- rhetorical presentation	- middle way or balance

In this example, the context of learning is Chinese, but the research process is an accepted Western tradition. This brings differences in thinking into high relief. My adaptation to the students is to work with them at each stage of the research process, helping them through the analysis, helping them to understand the limits of their research findings, and helping them to argue for their research's significance. At some point during their careers they may find themselves working with people from other disciplines who share research findings for discussion and application. This may be further complicated by work with people from other cultures. Graduate school is a fine incubator in which to explore such experience.

This is where my desire to help students become competitive within the larger world resides. It is about crossing borders cognitively, behaviourally, and culturally. I brought a border to them: the relevance of research, different learning behaviours and a human-centred design process, and I worked to understand their difficulty and sometimes their resistance in crossing it.

Interactive communication values

I now turn to two experiences I found troubling while teaching in Hong Kong. The interactive communication values that occured during a seminar and a critique each revealed the nexus of the problem of teaching effectively within another culture. In each difference in habitus was at play. The philosopher Confucius and his teachings provide a counterpoint to both experiences.

Interactive values: The seminar

The first context was a design seminar with fourteen Master students sitting around a table within a quiet room. Previous to the seminar, I handed out readings with questions for discussion. While the university conducts classes in English, the students within the seminar room were speaking Chinese, both Cantonese and Mandarin. As I entered, the room went silent. I began our discussion with my brief preamble: why it was that we read the selection, and that divergent opinions would be welcome. I encountered silence. I asked the first question. The silence continued. I rephrased the question hoping for a response, yet received silence with rapt attention. My impatience brought me to provide the answer myself.

Master: "The man of humanity speaks with hesitation." (Confucius, 1997:126)

I continued with another question. A brave soul who had once studied in the West volunteered to answer. Save for this student, the respectful silence would continue.

Master: "...do you understand what I have taught you? If you understand it, say you understand it. If you do not understand it, say you do not understand it. This is wisdom." (Confucius, 1997:55)

Apparently this aspect of Confucius' teaching is weak in Hong Kong. The students' desire to be 'correct' prevented them from speaking. Perhaps they did this to save face, or perhaps it reflected their language use. I listened to them carefully and accepted their English. Time was yet another factor, given that the students were not spontaneous and wanted time to think and consider their responses. Questions with the reading helped them to focus and gave them time to think. I became impatient but I tried to slow down, giving them the gift of time during the seminar.

Interactive values: The critique

The second context, a Hong Kong critique, was also marked by silence. My preamble invited divergent perspectives on the project work being discussed, stressed that the criticism should be constructively directed to the work, and suggested that the presenter might need to justify decisions and argue for their solution.

A disciple: "Is there one single word that one can practice throughout one's life?"

Master: "It is perhaps 'like-hearted considerateness.' What you do not wish for yourself, do not impose on others." (Confucius, 1997:156)

This Confucian teaching was taken very seriously during the critique. At play here was group orientation with its interactive value of fitting-in and the creation of a harmonious relationship with peers. Students perceive such actions to be virtuous ones. The students were reluctant to criticize each other's work, leaving this to the teacher, who had power and distance from them—and who was rarely challenged.

Master: "The gentleman deems it shameful if his speech exceeds his actions." (Confucius, 1997:146)

If the work is criticized, how could it be defended? This would be 'shameful.'

Unpacking these two teaching situations reveals fundamental cultural differences regarding interaction.

Table 3: Comparison of American and Chinese difference in selected cultural dimensions

American	Chinese
- individual orientation	- group orientation
- equality (little power difference)	- hierarchy (teacher knows best)
- fairness (everyone has opportunity)	- harmony (adjust and don't challenge)
- personal merit (achievement)	- group goal (everyone wins)

It is difficult to engage students when they respect such a strong hierarchy between themselves and their teacher. While voicing an opinion contrary to the teacher's would be unthinkable for many students, it can certainly be stated in private after class among peers. The desire to fit in and to favour harmony sometimes reduces discussion to a low common denominator. As a teacher it takes much energy and determination to raise the level of the students' discussion and to use it as an exploratory tool. It takes the creation of a context of acceptance: that of having an opinion, seeing things from a different perspective, and having the confidence to be out of the mainstream or to risk being wrong.

Conclusion

Hong Kong was a daily immersion in border crossing for me. It was a kind of culturally complementary situation to the students' cross-border experience with me. I made mistakes and embarrassed myself, but I didn't have the issue of face-saving to contend with. What began with typical American hubris, evolved into humility and an appreciation of Chinese culture—even an appreciation of Confucius. For me, border crossing was about my willingness to engage with others and to adapt to find a common ground that was mutually satisfying.

The question behind this paper is: How do we teach design within another culture? Using my experience coupled with some theoretical understanding, my answer is that we do it carefully, interactively, and by paying attention to cultural differences in nuanced ways. Just as learning

a foreign language allows us to discover more clearly the structure of our own native languages, teaching in Hong Kong brought me to a deeper understanding of the cultural roots of American education and design.

As mentioned, the teaching strategy applied a human-centred approach that was curious and respectful of others. I paid attention to my students, listened carefully, observed their behaviour, and adapted my teaching style accordingly. My teaching skills became more responsive. I learned that it would be all too easy to simply teach as I would have at home, while expressing dismay at the result and projecting the shortcomings on to the students.

I can offer a few practical suggestions, but whether they will be useful beyond the American-Chinese context I cannot predict. Begin by discussing cultural differences and assign a design project using human-centred processes. Make that project one that opens awareness and that provides an experiential base for the student to enrich his or her understanding. Remember that differences of habitus (behaviour and expectation) between teacher and students require reflection and adaptation. As mentioned, teaching in a foreign country will be different from teaching foreign students in one's own country. The differences in habitus can lead to practical ideas about how to adjust the ethos of the classroom or studio. This will take patience, reflection, and time. Finally, be clear about your role as coach or guide when teaching a new process (for example, research or human-centred design). The hierarchical system in which faculty are positioned in Hong Kong makes them less accessible, with students reluctant to ask questions that may betray a lack of understanding and loss of face. This is another situation in which the ethos of relationship and habitus needs attention. Remember that, despite these suggestions, there can be no single prescription for teaching effectively across borders. Allow yourself a deep dive into the culture. Pay attention to unexpected results, develop adaptive teaching strategies and humility, these attitudes will likely smooth the way.

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About the author

Besides a long teaching career, for twenty-six years Sharon was editor and publisher of an international, interdisciplinary, scholarly journal, Visible Language. The journal published papers almost evenly divided between foreign and American scholars. Now, editor emeritus, the journal is published by the University of Cincinnati. Sharon recently worked with a small committee organized by the National Association of Schools of Art and Design (NASAD), the American accrediting body, to revise its standards for graphic design. Among the new standards is research throughout all levels of design programs within the university, from bachelor through PhD. Long a proponent of design research, Sharon has championed the idea that design needs to build its own body of knowledge.