Internationalising a Creative Curriculum (0331)

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Abstract

Higher Education Institutions throughout the world are developing innovative responses to demands from employers for graduates to demonstrate the necessary attributes required to gain employment within an increasingly international and intercultural context. The majority of HEI's offer a wealth of cultural exchange programmes, and a number of optional international visits as part of undergraduate programmes. Participation in such initiatives however is often limited to students with the necessary economic means, and the social and cultural confidence.

This paper presents the findings of a three case studies within a Faculty of Creative Industries at a regional UK university. Each project was developed in response to the Higher Education Academy Strategic Enhancement Project 2014-15. The studies each present innovative ways in which teams redeveloped the curriculum in order to provide an international learning experience for the benefit of all learners, regardless of their economic, social, and cultural background.

Main Text

These projects were introduced at a regional UK based University. As with many universities based outside major population centres, the institution primarily relies upon the recruitment of undergraduate students from established further education college partners from the immediate University hinterland. The region is a post-industrial area that lacks the cultural diversity within the population of more metropolitan areas. 94.5% of undergraduate students at the University are UK domicile, a measure that is also reflected in the academic staff, the majority of whom do not have any professional or academic experience within an international context (Jackson).

The university has established partnerships with education institutions in 33 countries, but these relationships are focussed upon postgraduate projects, and centre upon established markets within business and engineering subject areas.

The university is formed of 13 individual schools, with each school responsible for a portfolio of undergraduate and postgraduate courses. In 2014 the School of Art & Design instigated a full review of its portfolio, and consequently redeveloped curriculum content in order to respond to stakeholder feedback. Central to this discussion was growing demand for employers within the creative industries to recruit graduates who are able to respond professionally to international audiences, and to intercultural communication and design problems. In order to develop a more 'internationalised' curriculum, the School participated in a strategic enhancement project with the Higher Education Academy. As a result three projects were developed, each in response to separate project themes.

Creating an international awareness campaign

Project 1 involved Photography students working with a UK based charity in order to produce imagery for an international context. The photography course recruits students from a wider geographical base than many other courses within the school, however this diversity is still contained within the UK, and lacking in any significant ethnic or cultural diversity.

For this project students formed creative teams of up to 7 individuals, and undertook a client brief requiring them to respond to an international communication problem centred around global citizenship and the need to reduce carbon emissions. Feedback from the client about the creative outcomes of the project demonstrated the diversity of ideas, and also offered comments about the challenge of communicating clear visual meaning to a diverse range of cultural audiences (Brown, 2015).

Interestingly, whilst feedback from the students about the project commented about the complexity of the communication assignment, the majority of comments were more focussed upon the difficulty, and challenge of working within a team, and inherent need for individuals to adhere to professional values and expectations. Whilst such transferable behaviours are central to the majority of undergraduate courses, they are until recently less explicit within a traditional Art and Design curriculum model. From a staff perspective, it became clear that there is a need to find new ways of embedding the importance of thorough research in the minds of students. At present they seem to associate the word 'research' with 'essays' and other written assignments but not with practical projects (Rose, 2012).

Documenting local fashion trends for an international archive

Project 2 involved Fashion Promotion students working on an international Street Style photography project that acknowledges this genre of fashion photography as a 'legitimate site of creativity' (Rocamora & O'Neill, 2008). Street style photography has been a popular medium of fashion identity representation for several decades and the immediacy and global reach of current social media has ensured that an international flavour permeates the 2D street style landscape. This international flavour, however, does not necessarily translate into real time experience.

To facilitate the experiential component of international junctures students collaborated with fashion departments in Melbourne, Brooklyn, Amsterdam and more recently Mumbai. Students were asked to capture the Metropolitan (or campus) mix, different social groups and the relationship to location in their different neighbourhoods and then compare these to each other via social media platforms and in class presentations.

In addition, some students were fortunate to travel to the US as part of an educational visit, and subsequently met with other participants in the project from the US based institution. This ability to instigate and develop international networks is central to transferable graduate skills often highlighted by employers, and is perhaps subsequently more important than the individual creative outcomes from the participating students.

Resolving intercultural communication problems through design.

The third assignment within the project involved graphic design students using their design knowledge in order to improve common communication problems for international visitors

to the city, with a particular focus upon developing an intercultural dialogue between 'local' and 'international' students.

Whilst this project involved students learning new technical skills to facilitate their ideas, the most challenging aspect of the project involved the requirement for students to introduce themselves, and develop working relationships with individuals from the target user group. Much of the dialogue between students during this research stage of the project further highlighted the frequency of naïve perceptions of national stereotypes. Indeed this reiterated the urgency of these interventions within the curriculum. Whilst many students claimed to be socially engaged, they lacked the ability to instigate conversations with international students, similarly feedback from international students themselves suggest that they choose not to engage with their fellow students who offer a provincial and Anglo-centric view of the world.

Conclusions

The success of all three projects can be measured in the participation of student numbers, with whole cohorts of students involved in each project. As with any course assignment, the quality of final outcomes was diverse, and yet student feedback identified particular recurring themes that subsequently offer suggestions to be considered when developing international curriculum projects.

In each of the projects, students commented upon the difficulty involved during the research and development stage of the assignment. In each case, the projects involved students developing ethnographic research methods that fall outside the traditional models of art and design based research at undergraduate level. Central to this methodology is the need for students to instigate developed and meaningful conversations with members of the target audience or user group. It is very unlikely that students have developed this knowledge and confidence prior to enrolment on their undergraduate course. To ensure such an important 'international' skill is developed in the majority of students in the future therefore, it is likely that the many UK based creative courses need to develop the ability of students to be confident with the fundamentals of more intercultural dialogue, and that social and professional engagement is highlighted as a core learning need within the creative curriculum.

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