**Icograda Education Network Conference 2009**

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# The walls come tumbling down: the Guangzhou, China Design Education Project As the economy shrinks and the world expands institutions of higher education must respond with new delivery methods and practices, or become ineffectual in equipping strategic thinkers for the future

## Abstract

*The world is going through an unprecedented recession while simultaneously the boundaries between people and cultures are expanding at the speed of fiber optics. Time and distance are placing demands of flexibility and innovation on schools not before seen. The standards are falling in many western countries that leave industries, parents and politicians wondering what the future holds for our economies.*

*Students are seeking high quality education coupled with high technology and minimal cultural boundaries and minimal costs to prepare them for their careers. They want it fast, cheap, good and current. And, they want to do it in their living room while talking to a professor in a one-on-one tutorial session. How can any University, Polytechnic, or any degree granting institution scramble to keep standards up and students enrolled at the same time? — Breaking down walls.*

*The Whanganui School of Design (WSD) has a 21-year tradition of bringing design excellence to New Zealand and beyond to the world. WSD is a hybrid in design education. There is a firm irreverence for tradition here while maintaining a strong appreciation for the tradition of excellence. This has been possible in part due to the isolation of New Zealand from the world that has created a very strong popular culture of travel and exposure to multiple cultures.*

*The school has a multicultural student body and faculty. It combines both a university approach to a liberal arts education as well as a hands, skill based style of a polytechnic institution. Perhaps it’s the Kiwi notion of do-it-yourselfers or the non-fussy nature of a people that have long fended for themselves. This has led WSD to a few pilot projects that address the needs that seem to be continually drawing multicultural students to our doorstep.*

*The Guangzhou, China project is collaboration with Chinese secondary educators and our more western-based tertiary curriculum. WSD staff and the staff of the Guangzhou School of Fine Arts will better prepare future students through a multicultural approach to design education early in their educational careers. We are experimenting with delivery methods, teacher exchanges, curriculum development and English preparedness. The goal is to prepare the students for the strong conceptual approach at WSD in design that is often different from eastern traditions. The goal is a smooth transition among western and eastern design educators and students.*

*The second pilot project is adapting our existing curriculum through blended learning for international students seeking a Master’s Degree in Design (MDes). We are also working with Malaysian graduate students on a blended mode of delivery that combines both real time visits, with online critiquing methods to create a customized Masters in Design Degree that meets the demands of today’s busy multitasking students. The experience is a very real one compared to most totally online programs and is very flexible compared with most brick and mortar programs. The results are enhanced learning that is fast on its feet in adapting to the changes our world and economy are delivering.*

**Key Words**: *cross-cultural design; collaboration; curriculum design; multicultural; graphic design education; global design pedagogy*

Creativity is a survival instinct — an innate skill that is in every form of life. Animals adapt to survive by producing the kaleidoscope of changing colors of a chameleon under threat to the dark black ink ejected from an escaping squid. Nature is creative. Designers use creativity to adapt in much the same way to their surroundings. ‘Creatives’ in each culture have vastly different styles. Styles that are honed under the pressures of changing economies, governments, political threats and freedoms, personal lifestyles, and density of population. Numerous factors create a culture, and those factors  
are filtered through the sensitivities of its creative members to emerge as a ‘cultural style’. As our cultures grow closer together and collaborate to find a common visual language the challenge is   
aid for design educators to create the balance — communicate globally yet retain the best of our unique cultural identities. Breaking down these cultural walls while respecting cultural identity is no easy task.

**Creative Survival**

Twenty first century changes are coming faster and with greater complexity in our individual cultures and industries. The impact on education results in an emphasis on results and completion rates in the hopes that real content has been delivered to future generations. Educational institutions are adapting to the information age, distance learning, blended deliveries, dwindling budgets and greater diversity in the classroom. This interplay of new technologies with artistic and cultural creativity gives life to new industries. This shift in society is the rise of human creativity as the key factor in our economy and society. The creative impulse — the attribute that distinguishes us, as humans, from other species — is now being let loose on an unprecedented scale.” (Florida, 2003)[[1]](#endnote-0)

The survival of our societies is greatly dependent on creative solutions from our various cultures. The “cultural creatives” coined by Florida are the key to communication and innovation and more importantly cohabitation.

Why are certain times of our common histories so rich with invention and creativity compared to more dormant times of history? Why are design styles so different in each culture? The answer seems to lie in forces of change and pressure that come together in such a way to demand innovation. With great change comes great opportunity so it is said. If anything can be said of this generation it is their ability to thrive during great flux — economic, cultural, political, religious and personal. Change on the scale we read of today in the blogs, newscasts, podcasts and multimedia ever-streaming video offers us a crucible of forces to respond to much like the time of the Industrial Revolution in America when great innovation and industry emerged. At the turn of the last century invention, technology, cultures and enterprise came together in a way that created a century of new technology and lifestyle changes. The ‘creatives’ of that time forged new ground in their process of creating. The Great Depression of the 1930s created many fortunes. Perhaps it is the survival instinct of ‘creatives’ that come forward at times like this in history. Today’s designers face a similar challenge.

**Is the educational approach relevant today?**

When educational institutions try to control, quantify or reproduce the results of creativity it usually does not happen. “All children enter school as question marks and leave as periods. It is an old saying, but still useful in thinking about how schooling is normally conducted.” (Postman, 1996)[[2]](#endnote-1)

The tendency to focus on results is contradictory to creativity. A results only focus is the product of mimicry and technology. The design processes may begin with mimicry, but the journey of discovery which leads to creativity is what design education should be about, not the end results. Creativity comes from a comfort with mistakes and experimentation. The process is open-ended and there is a certain faith in the process and the creativity ability to find that solution.

In the West there is generally a strong emphasis on linear thinking, logic and innovation — to be known for forging new ground. In the East there is generally a strong emphasis on rote learning, consistency and social harmony. These difference show up in how we design and approach problem solving. In our collaboration at WSD we see a place and time in the design process for each approach. As in most collaborations the product of the two are stronger than the one.

The History of modern Chinese design is virtually unknown due to its relatively late development compared to design in the West. Not until recent decades, since the opening up of China in 1979, has unifying Chinese graphic design history started to form: (Wong, 2001)[[3]](#endnote-2) This late start however has not slowed the pace and the quality of design as this new generation are in the transition stages of creating the Chinese identity through visual communications.

Michael Wong, Senior Lecturer at WSD said, “Chinese students of this generation are in the first stage of creative development. They are soaking up all things design.” (Wong, 2009)[[4]](#endnote-3) While this is a great learning tool there is a tendency to create exactly what they are given by the lecturer. Students tend to learn by rote learning and conceptual development is not as stronger emphasized in Eastern schools. Solution oriented design thinking demands mistakes. Mistakes are not very comfortable for the average Eastern student.

The history of political China sheds light on creative China. The form of “survival” designers and creative people took varied with government changes. “Many of the influences that shaped modern design throughout Greater China had their origins in centuries-old Chinese arts and crafts traditions. The most prominent example of Chinese modern design may be found in the Shanghai style of the 1920s and 1930s. This style reflected the various influences from the many foreign zones that occupied the city. The Art Deco movement with its geometric compositions renewed China’s interest with its own past and strong decorative heritage.” (Wong 2001)[[5]](#endnote-4)

Hong Kong played and plays a major role in Chinese graphic Design. They maintained the modern style until the late 1960s when an influx of American companies and their following of western designers gained stronger governmental support. This influence brought great impact on the vernacular designs of the time. “Local Chinese designers previously trained in Guangzhou and Shanghai had to gradually alter their style to fit into the new commercial environment dominated by American companies and to meet the standard set by American-trained designers.” (Wong 2001)[[6]](#endnote-5)

This influence was important for China because it brought Western design principles directly into contact with the Chinese culture. People like Henry Steiner of Yale, who studied under Paul Rand, brought the notion of the primacy of concept and strategic thinking to the area. Steiner established the melding of the cross-cultural look of western design with Chinese context. This began to inspire local Chinese designers to move to the next stage of identity formation in their design work. A renewed interest was seen in Chinese cultural symbols and meanings.

“The era of local design education began in the 1970s. Fundamental Bauhaus design principles were introduced and widely read in Hong Kong. Wucius Wong, an active design educator from the mid 1960s was American trained and wrote two books *Principles of two-dimensional design* and *Principles of three dimensional design*.” (Wong 2001)[[7]](#endnote-6) This brought a strong western, influence to design theory education in the region.

China’s open door policy in late 1978 was the point where many art and design institutions began to interact with overseas organizations. Design was taking a leap from the 1930s in Shanghai to the present.

“The main direction of the design education system in mainland China, in today’s context, is still based on a skill-training curriculum from the 1960s Russian model.” Creative and conceptual thinking have not been emphasized in design education. Thus the influx of overseas design concepts, in which Hong Kong initially was significant, played an influential and inspirational role for young people and students such as Wang Xu and Wang Yue-fei, who later became a pioneer in graphic design in mainland china.”(Wong 2001)[[8]](#endnote-7) 57

Design Education in America is strongly influenced by the Swiss Design Movement and the many diverse cultures that make up the America population. Rugged individualism is part of the “survival instinct” of many Americans that came to forge a new dream in America. Our designs are bold and diverse and conceptually driven. “Western intellectual tradition starts from contradictions; whereas in Asian culture, people tend more to look for convergences and to search for harmony. This difference between Eastern and Western cultures was fundamental in our discussions. The notion of harmony proved difficult for Western participants. Reflecting on my own experience as an American who taught many design courses with various mixtures of Eastern and Western students over many years, I observe that Western students value individuality and freedom to an extreme, while Eastern students value community and social obligation. Orientation to competition or collaboration also colors this cultural divide.” (Poggenpohl and Ahn 2002)[[9]](#endnote-8)

These unique cultural mixes are also at play in the design styles as well as design education in America and greater China. Educational systems in both Western and Eastern cultures are striving to combine the best of both approaches as they turn out designers that will speak a common visual language.

There are various stages in the growth of a young designer. Imitation, technical expertise and exploration are usually the elements that make up stage one. Stage two strongly guarded by ego and seeking your fame is discovering and establishing your style. Stage three seems to erase the past two stages and focus on the collaboration of and openness to others to create a greater body of work.

Design educators the incubators for students of various creative disciplines. They face an ever-expanding list of demands on their curriculum, time and facilities to produce viable graduates that are culturally diverse, broad based in their knowledge of design theory, as well as adept at various technological skills.

The WSD faculty and student body are multicultural and generally the approach to design is from a western perspective, but with the strong Kiwi and Maori influences that bring Pacific island and Asian sensitivity to the mix. New Zealanders have their own unique slant to Western culture. The curriculum is across all media with a strong typographical and methodical approach to the process of design. There is a collaborative emphasis with a strong cross-cultural sensitivity. The students produce a large body of work that has a quirky unique style and humor with strong social concepts that reflect the New Zealand ethos. There is an individuality in the style behind the conceptually-driven solutions that we seek to teach our students.

The strong multicultural student base at the *Whanganui School of Design* (WSD) led to collaboration with the *Guangzhou School of Fine Arts* to enhance the learning experience for the many Mainland Chinese students coming to New Zealand to study design from a western perspective. The goal for this collaboration is a curriculum that will blend both approaches and create a template for secondary schools and tertiary institutions to work toward in multicultural design education.

The Guangzhou Project began as a dialogue with many of our feeder schools in and around China. We sought a stronger conceptual base for Chinese students and making the process more comfortable and natural to them. To begin this process we had to go back to the secondary schools in China and look at their curriculum and style of teaching. “Many classrooms in China have large student numbers and must teach in a very direct way that leaves no doubts in the students mind what task is required of him. Worksheets are common as a form of instruction,” according to Michael Wong. Students are very disciplined and technically accomplished, but are not as comfortable with open ended or group collaborations. This seems to be cultural tendency with many of this generation being only children.

The need was to take students beyond Stage One of soaking up information and skills to Stage Two which is more explorative and conceptual in nature.

To accomplish this we began about a year ago to have teacher exchanges. Several Chinese design instructors came to New Zealand to experience the many course offerings from business to the creative arts at UCOL Wanganui, the educational umbrella over Whanganui School of Design. The new approach and interchange brought many things to light for these instructors. The notion of critiques was difficult for students that didn’t want their work seen. Exploration, ideation and brainstorming showed a pathway to problem solving than their more skill based approach. English, typography and liberal arts were also components that were not as strongly taught in these particular schools. This gave us the template to being curriculum development for the students.

One graduate from WSD relocated to Guangzhou to teach our style and to help create a curriculum where the students would have a better launching pad when they graduated to western design schools and WSD. English is a common hurdle for all international students in western schools and that became a top priority in our curriculum. WSD began an intensive English for Design course that was designed by Kate Smith and Rachel Smith (no relation) from our staff. This course introduces students to the real world of New Zealand and helps establish a vocabulary of design terms to increase their success in the school and comfort with design terminology. The transition period varies for many students but this intensive gives them an anchor to lean on during the education process.

The students enter the mid semester of the first year of our three-year Bachelor program. A special curriculum (see table 1)[[10]](#endnote-9) was developed for this first semester to help them level up to blending into the second year with no restraints. Some of their courses/papers are blended with our main student body while some courses/papers are with their cohort from China. This adds to their cultural emersion and enjoyment of the experience. A main design paper which is a 9 hour per week intensive course combines content from production, computer skills, design methodology, typography, color theory and basic design combined several teachers in each discipline to give them an intensive in the areas that other students have covered before the merge with other classes in the following semester.

Projects were written that push the boundaries of teamwork and open sourcing. For example students studied the basic design principles, but had to collaborate with eachother to arrive a solution at the end of this module. Each student had ‘authority’ of the use of one of the principles. The consensus could only be reached when all agreed to its outcome. This forced students to combine ideas and approaches to find the best graphic solution to the problem.

Time and focused study and attention from lecturors has given the students a base for creating alternate approaches to different environments and learn a western approach to survival by design.

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10. See Table 1 [↑](#endnote-ref-9)