Adapting Culturally Responsive Teaching to Enrich Experiential Learning in a Malaysian Graphic Communication Design Classroom

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Abstract Experiential learning has always been the core of graphic design education as the graphic design field is practical in nature. Besides honing the students' intellectual, creative and observational qualities, the sensitivity to culture of their own and of others is also of importance in graphic design education. A 6-day study trip to Osaka, Japan for 23 students played a critical role in supporting their learning, to meet the module learning objectives of learning about and understanding another culture and to gain real-world experience in the context of graphic design. Relevant Culturally Responsive Teaching principles were adapted to facilitate the students' learning and research process. The students' research, idea development, final design and written reflection served as outcomes of the module. In conclusion, although graphic design education stresses on skilful and creative output of design principles, the knowledge and sensitivity on the topic of culture is of equal importance.

Keywords: Culturally Responsive Teaching, Experiential Learning, Graphic Communication Design, Graphic Design Education, Culture

INTRODUCTION

This paper is the culmination of the findings derived from students' design work for a module, International Graphic Communication that is offered in the BA (Hons) in Graphic Communication Design programme at Taylor's University, Selangor, Malaysia. The module lecturers organised a 6-day class trip to Osaka, which focused on students' exploration of a foreign culture through academic and in-situ research. The output of the students' research was works of design that reflected their interpretation of their chosen theme, expressing an aspect or some aspects of the Japanese culture. The entire process was guided through a brief prepared by the lecturers, and a series of lectures and tutorials for 7 weeks. The approach that was taken by the lecturers were adapted from some principles of Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT). The outcome of the students' work, as well as their design process and reflection, were the measures of the students' learning, framed by Kolb's experiential learning theory.

BACKGROUND

A. Culturally Responsive Teaching

Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) looks into appropriating culture by which teachers develop and implement teaching strategies that are in tune with students' lived experiences and everyday lives (Brown-Jeffey & Cooper, 2011). CRT approach was engaged by various education institutions in the United States to address racial issues and to promote cultural diversity (Richards, et al., 2007; Johnston et al., 2017).

In a multicultural country like Malaysia, although racial issues and oppression are not the norm, CRT could be an appropriate teaching strategy because it allows and encourages the inclusion of various cultural elements. At Taylor's University, the lecturers of International Graphic Communication aimed to engage students in learning outside of classroom environment, where they could acquire design knowledge through experiencing a foreign culture.

B. International Graphic Communication

International Graphic Communication is a module that is offered to Year 2 Graphic Communication Design students. This module provides students with the opportunity to understand the role of design and the designer in a wider cultural, political and social context. It aims to introduce students to local and/or global design and design issues through engagement with outside agencies, groups or cultures, which may present opportunities for collaboration.

To adapt to CRT for the purpose of enriching students' learning in a multicultural setting instead of addressing racial issues, the researchers have identified 7 out of the 9 CRT principles (Ladson-Billings, 1994) that were mapped to the module learning outcomes of International Graphic Communication.

The rest of the CRT principles were then mapped to the module's learning outcome, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Mapping Crt To Module Learning Outcomes.

Relevant CRT Principles	International Graphic Communication's module learning outcomes
Active teaching methods – students playing the active role in learning through crafting curriculum and developing learning activities, promoting ownership.	Demonstrate critical thinking through examining sources that articulate the tenants of diverse contemporary opinions concerning relevant international graphic communication practices.
Culturally mediated instructions – refers to instructions embedded in the curriculum content that consist of cognition interceded by culture, social settings that are culturally accepted for learning, and knowledge that carries cultural values.	
Teacher as the facilitator – teacher as facilitator & navigator of students'	Apply various design skills, experimental and/or

learning through instructing, guiding, mediating, and consulting of knowledge.	innovatively, with an emphasis on issues such as diversity, social & personal responsibility and self-expression.
Student-controlled classroom discourse – some parts of the lesson will be placed in the students' charge.	
Cultural sensitivity – teachers gaining knowledge of the various cultures in their classrooms and include them into the design of classroom instructions.	Understand another culture, within the contexts of graphic design communication.
Communication of high expectations – frequent messages from the teachers and the school that students will succeed.	Enhance students' understanding and outlook on global design.
Small group instructions and academically-related discourse – focus on organising instruction in groups that are student-controlled and low-pressure.	

LITERATURE REVIEW

Teaching and learning do not only involve delivery methods and strategies, it also encompasses the ways students learn and their achievements at the end of their study. Scott (2015) emphasises that learners in the 21st century need to be well equipped with skills for critical thinking, effective communication and innovation in order to solve problems through negotiation and collaboration. The module lecturers of International Graphic Communication extended this emphasis to the class room learning that are infused with Culturally Responsive Teaching principles. The study of the students' learning outcome in the said module is underpinned by Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory that advocates learning through real life experience. Kolb's Experiential Learning

As part of the progressive approach towards education, Dewey (1938) challenged thinkers and educators to examine "the organic connection between education and personal experience" where both aspects not only form a unique and complex relationship, but also provided an intriguing setting in implementing a different set of teaching and learning techniques. Adapting from the Lewinian model of Action Research and Laboratory training, Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory looked at this process as a continuous fourstage process where it encourages the learner to acquire knowledge from new experiences. This holistic process looks at the learner to continuously create and implement ideas for improvement. The learner also should have the abilities to be willingly active involved in the experience, to be able to reflect on the experience, to possess and use analytical skills to conceptualize the experience and possesses decision making and problem solving skills to gain new ideas from the experience.

The process identified that effective learning can only take effect when a learner completes a cycle of the adapted Lewinian four stages model: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization and active experimentation where each step encourages learners to examine their experiences through different reflective practices of feeling, watching, thinking and doing.

Concrete Experience (Feeling): A learner encounters a new experience and observes the whole process as an opportunity for learning by actively participating in the process, taking part in the activities through senses and intellectual engagements.

Reflective Observation (Watching): A learner reflects on the experience by paying attention to any inconsistencies between experience and understanding through reviewing the situation and finding meaning behind the experience.

Abstract Conceptualisation (Thinking): A learner develops critical arguments and theories with a goal to create new concepts that can be applied in the future. The task here is to explain the experience through analysing new idea or changes to preexisting concept by identifying recurring themes, problems and/or issues that will help them with new learning experience.

Active Experimentation (Doing): A learner takes risks and applies the learned experience into another situation where they use the abstract concepts to solve problems, make decisions and influence people and/or events. In the final stage, individuals apply what they learned in the experience to another situation. The goal is to test the concepts in different and new situations to discover ways to improve.
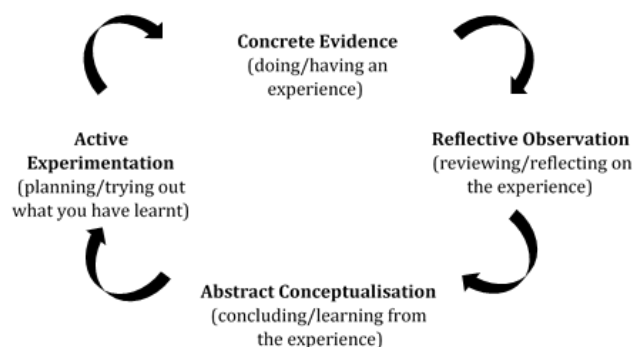

Figure. 1 Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Cycle

Kolb's (1984) learning model in the application of experiential learning for higher education looks at presenting the process of knowledge creation as the "combination of grasping experience and transforming it" through exposure of direct sense experience and in-context action control as the primary source of lifelong learning. This process takes place by dismantling and assembling the meaningful experiences which are mostly culturally mediated by endless learning cycles through many generations and give lives meaning. But Dewey (1938) warned that the interpretations and classifications of these experiences may generate possible base of naive findings. Therefore, learners who practices experiential learning will need to track back these information to the original source in order to both reinforce the findings and to make sense and wiser output of the learning experience.

On this day and age, cultural studies is increasingly embedded into the curriculum as the classroom contains multiracial and multicultural learners. Through culturally responsive teaching, critical thinkers are easily developed with necessary skills and knowledge that are able to insert reflective decisions in their personal and social doing (Kim & Slapac, 2015). Dunlop (1999) argues that for learners to develop the

skill of self-reflexivity, they need to be exposed to various forms of activities and discourse.

Turner (2012) observes that, in the new age of humanities, people from different disciplines are able to converse and work with each other on which made cultural studies as their main language. No longer is any ethnic, national, or geographical places of distinct border referenced as culture as it used to be; it is now constantly evolves and interconnected (Kim & Slapac, 2015).

PROBLEM STATEMENT

In graphic design education it is pertinent to produce students who are not only skilled in solving design-related problems but to solve those problems with relevance and sensitivity to the culture where those problems are found (Mullen & Chalmers, 1990; Marshall, 2007; Meyer, 2008). This is because the messages sent out by graphic designers in the process of solving problems are to be understood by the recipients within that culture (NCERT, 2011). As with any communication form, the sender must be able to speak the "language" that is understood by the recipient/audience (Lunenburg, 2010). Besides the spoken form, language here also refers to visual language, which in the context of graphic design, encompasses the principles of design and the content of the design topic (Malamed, 2011).

Culture is the teacher of spoken, written and visual languages in the history of mankind. Culture plays an important role in our everyday life. Without us realising it, our actions, thoughts, responses, beliefs and more, are shaped by culture (Browne, 2008; Meyer, 2008; SpencerOatey, 2012). One effective way to learn about culture is through immersing oneself into it, through experiencing it (Hansen, 2011).

Kolb's (1984) learning model in the application of experiential learning for higher education looks at presenting the process of knowledge creation as the "combination of grasping experience and transforming it" through exposure of direct sense experience and in-context action control as the primary source of lifelong learning. This process takes place by dismantling and assembling the meaningful experiences which are mostly culturally mediated by endless learning cycles through many generations and give lives meaning.

The educational trip to Osaka played a critical role in supporting the students' learning, as it aimed for students to gain real-world experience. Prior to the trip, lectures on relevant topics, which served to provide vital knowledge, were delivered in class. The lecturers facilitated the students' learning and research process through engaging in a series of research materials and the educational trip itself.

Upon the completion of the trip and participation in all class lectures and tutorials, the students were expected to produce a visual outcome that encompassed their understanding and experience, reflecting their ability to think critically about cultural and design issues.

METHODOLOGY

Due to its recursive nature of planning, acting, developing and reflecting (Mertler, 2012), action research was chosen for this study because it revolves around those steps required to planning and carrying out a module, conducting a field trip, documenting students' learning process and reflecting for future and continuous improvement.

For those purposes, action research was deemed the most suitable method for this research as it yields qualitative data, which allows the researchers to study and understand the students' learning of a culture through experience.

The action research model of this study was adapted from Riel's Action Research Cycle due to its systematic, iterative process of action research. As featured in Fig. 2, there are three cycles shown in Riel's model. After each cycle, reflection is done with relevant stakeholders of the research, to create improvement for the next cycle. This shows that the practice of research is not a single approach but the interconnectedness of various forces that empower personal, professional and social change (Riel, 2016).

As the International Graphic Communication module is offered for only 7 weeks at the beginning of every year in the academic calendar, each time the module is offered is the cycle of action research of the study (refer to Fig. 3). The data was studied by both lecturers, who act as each other's critical partner, and moderated in the Board of Examiner's meeting by the Programme Director and Head of School. Based on the collected data, discussion for improvement was also conducted with students who will take this module in the coming semester. Improvement is then made in the following semester when this module is offered again.

In each cycle, 4 steps of action research, adapted from Riel's Action Research Cycle, takes place. Firstly, the researchers/lecturers studied about the Japanese culture and planned for the module and field trip by adapting relevant

Culturally Responsive Teaching principles. Next, "take action" refers to conducting lectures and the field trip. As for the third step - collection of data and analysing it – this was where the students' design process (documented in PowerPoint slides), final design outcome and reflection, were collected by the researchers and analysed accordingly. The final step is when the researchers, having analysed the collected data, reflect on the analysis and start the action research cycle all over again for further improvement to the module and the students' learning.
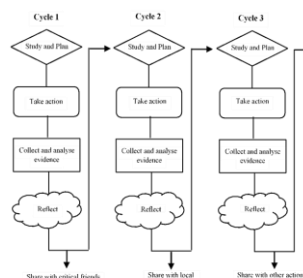

Figure. 2: Riel's Action Research Model
Source: Mertler, C. A. (2012). Action Research: Improving Schools and Empowering Educators. (3rd ed.). USA: Sage Publications.
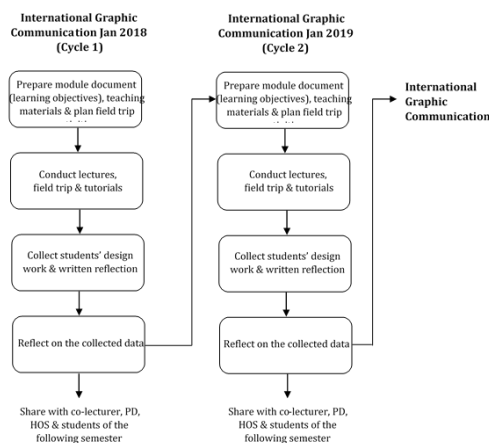
Figure. 3: Action Research model of this study, adapted from Riel's Action Research model.

RESULTS OF ANALYSIS

The data that was collected was in the form of students' final design work, each accompanied by a rationale and their written reflection. These data is then mapped in line with Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle (refer to Fig. 4).
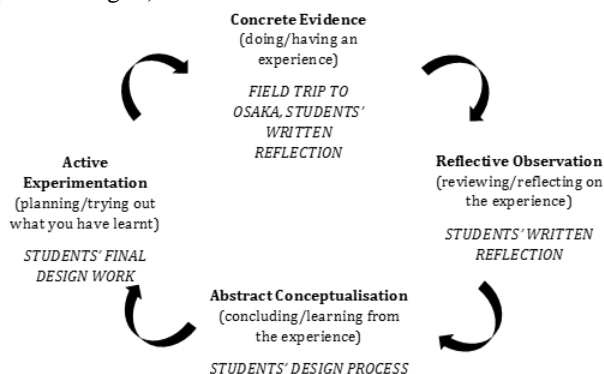

Figure 4. Data of this research, mapped to Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle.

Referring to Fig. 3, the concrete evidence (doing/having an experience) of this experiential learning is the field trip to Osaka. The students' exploration of Osaka, in their reflection, denoted excitement, and anticipation.

> *"The trip to Japan was **exciting**, **enlightening** and **eyeopening**. In my time there I was able to analyze the culture and their behavior, their symbolic way of life and how they (Japanese people) interacted with each other."* (Reflection, 4 APRIL 2018, MZK)

> *"It was **fun** to have study trip at Japan with friends and lecturers. It was a **different** experiences that we were there instead of we just research and see from screen."* (Reflection, 4 APRIL 2018, FLK)

> *"...really **opened my eyes**. It was a **really pleasant** experience from looking at Japan's culture on the internet to visiting the actual place..."* (Reflection, 4 APRIL 2018, HA)

Also supported by their written reflection, the next level in Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle –

Reflective Observation (reviewing /reflecting on the experience) – sees to students commenting or sharing about their experience in this trip. As the selected reflections show, the students found this experience insightful, made them more considerate of others' culture, and that immersion is good for learning about a culture. They also find that the new way of learning deepened their knowledge and helped them not take culture for granted.

> *"The field trip was **insightful**, and I appreciated listening to everyone's experience of the country and its culture. The language barrier made me **consider** how other people might perceive concepts/ideas differently, and how that **translates into many unique individual experiences**."* (Reflection, 4 APRIL 2018, CYS)

> *"I firmly believe that intercultural **learning through immersion is the best way** to understand and get a feel of different cultures, different worlds to **enrich** a person's mindset."* (Reflection, 4 APRIL 2018, DH) *"The most **fascinating** way of learning was absolutely having the opportunity to join the field trip to Osaka, thus putting in practice a **new way of learning** in order to reach lecturers' as well as groups' own expectations in producing the final art work."* (Reflection, 4 APRIL 2018, KRY)

> *"I also think that this class is very out front about what is needed as a designer, which is to be **culturally intellectual**, because design is also a **reflection of the culture** that we are in, so yes there are a lot of culture influences in the classroom."* (Reflection, 4 APRIL 2018, VLC)

> *"In this module, it gave us a **lot of exploration** in the different culture also gave us inspiration of the visual outcome that we have to produce. It helps **deepens the knowledge** of Japanese culture and we get a chance to **compare** with our own culture, even though we are all Asians..."* (Reflection, 4 APRIL 2018, YBE)

Following this is the abstract conceptualisation (concluding/learning from the experience) in Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle. The data collected in the form of students' design process in PowerPoint slides, indicated that research is the basic and foremost important step in design, their experience in Osaka itself had fortified their understanding of the Japanese culture, enabling them to choose and focus on one unique aspect of the culture and to explore ways to express their concept, which was derived from their chosen themes. Part of the process started with the students doing some background research about the Japanese culture before deciding which theme to choose from (they were given 4 – "Simplicity", "Less is More", "Assimilation" and "Heritage"). The researchers observed that the students were confident in choosing a theme once they had done their research. The freedom to choose also resulted in the students being independent in conducting more research upon making their decision. With the freedom given,

they demonstrated good time management skills and responsibility in their learning.

Finally, the active experimentation (planning/trying out what you have learnt) in the cycle sees to students' producing a final visual outcome. The outcome reflects their understanding of Japanese culture, added with an interpretation of their chosen themes, with consideration and sensitivity towards design principles, and maintaining the essence of the Japanese culture. Three outstanding final outcomes had been selected for this paper, as listed in the following.

The final outcome of CYS and CYB's (Fig. 5) exploration and understanding of the Japanese culture is a series of staged photography, manipulated creatively. The images reflect their chosen theme of "Assimilation", with their representation of their own experience when assimilating with that culture during the field trip.

GKY and RKL focused on the Japanese Geisha culture, after having chosen "Heritage" as their theme. Their final design work (Fig. 6) looks at the two most significant aspects of these performers - their graceful movements and the beauty of the floral prints of the kimono.

Fig. 5: Final outcome of CYS & CYB's work. Clockwise from left – *Mouthful*, *Other*, *Drained* & *Traveller's Song.*

Figure. 6: Final outcome of GKY & KRL's work – a series of Geisha movements, ornamented by the floral patterns from their kimono.

Figure. 7: Final outcome of HA & JN's work – a series of *omamori* stickers, as good luck charms for graphic design students.

The theme that HA and JN chose was "Heritage". They specifically studied the Japanese culture of *omamori*, or good luck charms, which is rife in the daily life of the Japanese. Creatively relating to their own lives as graphic design students, this pair interpreted *omamori* and the various Japanese symbols into a series of contemporary stickers (Fig. 7), something their peers could easily relate to, rationalising that every design student can do with a bit of luck.

DISCUSSION

The background of the paper had previously stated that some principles of CRT had been adapted to the module to meet the modules' learning outcomes.

When CRT principles were engaged in the delivery of the module, the students' learning of culture is enriched. The study of their learning outcome is then framed by Kolb's Experiential Learning theory.

Table 2 Mapping Analysis Of Results To Experiential Learning Stages.

Experiential Learning Stages	Evidence	Analysis
Concrete Evidence	Field trip to Osaka, students' written reflection	Excitement, anticipation.
Reflective Observation	Students' written reflection	Insightful, made them more considerate of others' culture, immersion is good for learning about a culture, a new way of learning, deepened their knowledge, helped them not take culture for granted.
Abstract Conceptualisation	Students' design process	Independence in learning, freedom in choosing, mature in time management
Active Experimentation	Students' final design outcome	Understanding of Japanese culture, own interpretation of their chosen themes, consideration and sensitivity towards design principles while maintaining the essence of the Japanese culture.

CONCLUSION

Culturally Responsive Teaching is applicable to International Graphic Communication due to the cultural implications and inclusiveness in learning about various cultures, which is pertinent to graphic design students. This paper is important as the research documented and studied the students' learning through the field trip, their written reflection, their design process and final design outcome.

Kolb's Experiential Learning theory which underpins the study of the students' learning enabled the researchers to study the students' learning outcome systematically. When mapped against this theory, the researchers found that the teaching and learning of this module had been meaningful.

It must be stressed that this study is limited to the said module and university. Therefore, the findings

cannot be generalised. As the researchers are active educators in the field of art and design, Action Research was deemed suitable a methodology as it allows continuous improvement to the module.

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