Chapter 9
Collabor8:
Online and Blended Cross-Cultural Studios

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The rapid advancement of online communication technologies is reconfiguring the creative industries through globally networked and interdisciplinary modalities of practice. These inescapable shifts are challenging most of our assumptions about the nature of creative processes. Consequently art and design educators are impelled to teach students in ways that mirror contemporary creative processes. This inevitably includes collaboration in online environments. Instigated in 2003, The Collabor8 Project (C8) responds to these conditions by challenging design students from universities and colleges in Australia and China to collaborate online. Recently, C8 has evolved to integrate blended pedagogical strategies that enable stronger collaborative relationships to develop. This chapter provides a comparative analysis of two project iterations conducted during 2008 and 2009. Using data collected through observation, interviews, questionnaires, discussions, and specific research tasks within creative briefs, it identifies, discusses, and offers insights relating to a range of issues encountered in collaborative interactions between very different groups of undergraduate and postgraduate art and design students.

BACKGROUND

The creative industries are undergoing significant transformation as societal and industrial changes reshape them into hitherto unforeseen multidisciplinary hybrids. In a marketplace where strong disciplinary skills are taken as given and problem-solving abilities, communication skills, collaborative strengths, creative and innovative thinking have become mandatory, individuals must master the abilities required to coordinate synchronized parallel processing while immersed in complex,

unstructured problems (McArthur, McIntyre, Watson, 2007). If graduates are to compete in this increasingly globalised economic landscape then appropriate transnational pedagogic models facilitated by digital communication channels are needed. Given the speed of the changes underway however it is unsurprising that educationalists to date have been slow to respond (DiPaola, Dorosh and Brandt, 2004).

Additionally, China's increasingly integral position in relation to industry (a key factor influencing this study) is creating an urgent need for culturally based education for both eastern and western students as they enter a globally networked world of work (Buchanan, 2003). However, although the case for such approaches is clear, the reality of facilitating networked educational experiences related to east-west co-creation online is complex and fraught with challenges. It is widely acknowledged that cultural factors present significant challenges to effective learning and teaching in online contexts. Visual, auditory and environmental cues to communication and understanding are known to diminish in digital environments, even amongst students from the same cultural backgrounds. In Confucian Heritage Culture (CHC) contexts educational paradigms are usually more teacher-centered than western learning and teaching models further compounding the issues educators face. Historically, western styles of education have attracted significant suspicion within eastern contexts as an inappropriate challenge to educational traditions (Zhang 2007; Ziguras 2001). An effective, if superficial analogy, might be drawn related to the perceived (and rightly challenged) notion of 'east' and 'west' as a dichotomy representing student-centered (western) and teacher-centered (CHC) learning modes. This context does not provide the scope to deconstruct the discourse of Orientalism (Said, 1978) but a dearth of contemporary literature regarding culture in relation to online modes of art and design education suggests strongly that

little work using network technologies to foster intercultural co-creation online has occurred.

Theories about Culture

Many contemporary ideas about cultural differences are based on anthropologists Hall and Hall's theory (1990) of a continuum of cultural dimensions ranging from high context to low context. Asian cultures such as Japan and China tend to be high context cultures while western societies such as Germany, USA and Australia are low context cultures. In high-context cultures, everyone knows how to behave in a variety of situations without explicit instructions. In low context cultures people constantly negotiate to formulate ad-hoc solutions (Aoki, Aydın, 2006). Morse (2003, p. 51) asserted that in online courses, "integration of high context participants is made more difficult by technology differences as well as the communication norms implicit in their cultural background. Many online learning environments are typically low-context, particularly those that are text-based (Stirling, 2005). The other key cultural theory relevant to this study is Hofstede's (2001) notion of a range of five cultural dimensions: 1. Power distance; 2. Uncertainty avoidance; 3. "Individualism versus collectivism"; 4. "Masculinity vs. femininity"; 5. Long-term orientation, (Hofstede, 2001, p. 29).

Others have offered perspectives on the role of culture in online learning. Bonk and Kim (2002), and Bonk and Wisher (2000) acknowledged the role of culture in research examining, "collaborative learning to address student online construction of knowledge, social interactions, and critical thinking." Hewling (2005) asserted a model based on a "culture of doing". Kim, Kim, Park and Rice (2007) conducted a study into configurations of communication relationships in Korea through face-to-face, email, instant messaging, mobile phone, and SMS media.

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