CULTURE SENSITIVE DESIGN EDUCATION – THE BEST OF ALL WORLDS

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ABSTRACT
The aim of this paper is to discuss the importance of sensitivity for cultural aspects of design, in design education. This relates to the cultural context of the intended users, as well as to the cultural context of design students and design educators. In both cases sensitivity for cultural diversity is a prerequisite for a success.
The paper starts by framing what we mean with cultural diversity, emphasizing on the sensitivity of the topic itself, elaborating on the thin line between stereotyping and acknowledging patterns and nuances. Next, we describe our experiences with two design courses addressing specifically the cultural context in design (by the design brief) and in design education (by organising a design course in an international setting). The paper concludes on the themes that are relevant for cultural sensitivity in design education, and reflects on the overall insights that need to be further developed.

Keywords: Design education, cultural sensitivity, design methods and tools.

1 INTRODUCTION

In today's globalizing world an increasing number of design students and design educators study and work alternatively in various places all over the world. In their encounters with other design educators and students they are faced with the challenges and opportunities of different cultural backgrounds, in particular with other frames of references about what design is and how design should be educated. Moreover, because in design education students often work in groups, these international encounters create awareness for the cultural aspects of design itself, because the interpretation of a design brief and of desirable design solutions are discussed from different cultural backgrounds. Also, cultural sensitivity for *design education* and for the design outcomes are intertwined, and will therefore both be part of this paper. However, our focus remains on how to approach cultural sensitivity in design education.

The aim of this paper is to broaden our understanding of what culture sensitivity means in the context of design education. What are the aspects that need attention, and how can we make design education culture sensitive. The paper sketches some of the challenges and opportunities that design educators and students face in international exchange situations, first by giving a theoretical background, next by reporting on two specific experiences with design education in an international setting. The paper concludes on how to support design educators to deal with cultural diversity among students and educators in an inspiring way. For this study, we chose an exploratory approach: through literature, our own experiences, and the evaluation of two design courses we develop an understanding of what culture sensitive design education is, and insights in how to deal with it.

2 CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN DESIGN EDUCATION

2.1 Culture in the context of design
Culture can be defined in many different ways, as showed by Krober and Kluckhohn [1], who listed 164 definitions of culture. The definition of Bates and Plog [2] offers a strong basis for the design practice: culture is *'[the] system of shared beliefs, values, customs, behaviours and artefacts that the members of a society use to cope with their world and with one another, and that are transmitted from generation to generation through learning'*. This definition resonates with the field of design because it allows designers to approach cultural values and beliefs *through* cultural practices, such as

behaviour and artefacts, the domain of design. Also, it offers a perspective on culture as shared values and practices *in a group* and that it is *learned*, not inherited, again, two aspects that design can relate to. Although the definition might suggest that culture is a static phenomenon, is it not approached as such, culture changes over time, and design plays an active role in these changes [3]. Finally, the line between what is individual and what is cultural is difficult to draw [4]; people can be 'grouped' in various ways, as members of a nation, region, generation, family, sport, profession, gender, and - relevant in the context of our study - also as members of a design school. The common question in all these different perspectives is the question how people attribute meaning to their world, to their lives, their activities and to the artefacts that play a role in it. Also, meaning attribution from a cultural perspective will be an important perspective in this paper.

2.2 Relevance of culture for design (education)

Students often mention that awareness of the cultural context is relevant for design outcomes because it avoids mismatches between products and users [4]. However, further studies show that cultural awareness may have additional benefits. For example, a better understanding of culture and of cultural variation may lead to new product ideas, or may be a strong incentive to strengthen a group identity. Furthermore, cultural awareness is not only relevant for the *design outcome*, but also for the *design process* itself: for example it may be key to the success of the interaction between designers and the intended users. Participatory sessions, methods and materials need to be tuned to the cultural context [5,6,7]. These two aspects, avoiding mismatches and providing rich sources of inspiration, are in turn the reason why design education should care about cultural sensitivity within the educational approach: to make sure that there is no mismatch between what is offered and how it is perceived (effective education), and to make sure that the richness of the cultural setting is enriching the learning process (inspiring education).

3   DEVELOPING CULTURAL SENSITIVITY

To address culture in designing is not only a matter of becoming aware of the cultural context, it is also a matter of developing cultural sensitivity: to know what aspects matter, how they matter and how to incorporate these aspects in the design process and in the design outcome. In other words, cultural awareness may be an eye-opener, but learning how to include cultural contexts in design is a matter of *developing* cultural sensitivity, it is a learning process. The question is: how do we develop cultural sensitivity in designing?

3.1 Cultural sensitivity: the different themes

A person is *cultural sensitive* when (s)he experiences his/her own beliefs and behaviours as just one organization of reality among many viable possibilities. Also, a cultural sensitive person is aware of different value systems and practices. Bennet and Bennet developed the *Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity* (DMIS) that describes how people who become more *interculturally competent* move from *ethnocentrism* to *ethnorelativism* in six stages; denial, defence, minimization, acceptance, adaptation, and integration [8]. Moreover, the *intercultural readiness check* distinguishes cultural sensitivity as a set of four competences one needs to be able to function well in intercultural settings: 1) intercultural sensitivity (the degree to which a person takes an active interest in others: their cultural background, needs and perspectives and how they express themselves); 2) intercultural communication (the degree to which a person actively monitors how (s)he communicates; 3) building commitment (the degree to which people actively try to influence their social environment, based on a concern for building relationships and integrating strong and diverse networks); 4) managing uncertainty (the degree to which a person sees the uncertainty and complexity of cultural diverse environments as an opportunity for personal development [9, 10]. This approach shows that cultural sensitivity in itself is not enough, it is part of a system of competences. However, in this paper we will focus on the exploration of how to develop cultural sensitivity itself, as a first step to intercultural readiness.

3.2 Cultural sensitivity in Current Design Education

Most current design education approaches acknowledge the importance of understanding the user, hence the growing number of tools, methods, and techniques such as cultural probes, context mapping, personas, customer journeys, and so on. These approaches aim to develop a designers empathic

sensitivity. However, design methods that aim to develop sensitivity for cultural context, and cultural variation within that context, is limited. Yet, awareness for culture in design (education) is becoming more and more acknowledged, and has recently been addressed by different scholars, differing in goals and in approaches.

The Capability Driven Design approach [11], the Crossing Cultural Chasms card set [12], and the development of the communication tool Cultura [13] are examples of approaches that *provide designers with a lens* to examine cultures of intended users. These approaches are developed for the professional design practice, and can be part of the training in design education. Yet, in design education, dedicated tools and techniques that address cultural sensitivity *in the process of education* are rare. Van Boeijen et al., [4,5,6,14] showed the importance of cultural diversity in design education: from a series of international workshops executed and evaluated over the years, cultural variation among design students not only leads to different approaches to design solutions, the barriers that they face in teamwork also lead to a better understanding of their own cultural values and practices. The design teachers in these workshops did not have a specific approach to this cultural variety among students, but were open for it's effect. This could lead to the assumption that the mere effect of being in an international context is already prompting cultural sensitivity, provided the design teacher is open to it. Another aspect that deserves attention is a student's learning style in an international setting. Joy and Kolb [15], show that preferences in learning styles are influenced by cultures, also, for an effective learning design educators should tune their teaching [16].

In sum, methods and tools for cultural variation seem to focus on intended users, especially when the designer's cultural background differs much from - or at least is very unfamiliar with - his or her intended users. Less attention is paid to the design student's *own cultural background* and how this relates to the context he or she is designing for. Also design educators do not reflect much on the cultural background of their students and what that means for design. It is our belief that awareness of one's own cultural background in design education is a strong basis to develop cultural sensitivity for other cultures, and vice versa, working together with people from different cultural backgrounds will raise awareness of the particularities of one's own culture.

4   THE PRACTICE OF CULTURAL SENSITIVE DESIGN EDUCATION

In this section we describe our experiences with two international courses, which were developed specifically for the students to develop cultural sensitivity in designing (design outcome), and at the same time to challenge ourselves to develop cultural sensitivity in the design educational process. Two design courses were developed for two different design schools in China: a one-week summer course in Dong Hua University (Shanghai), for 26 design students, focussing on their life on the campus, and a one-week winter course at Jianghan University in Wuxi, for 23 design students and 25 design professionals, with a focus on taking care about clothes. In both courses, cultural diversity was addressed explicitly and in many ways: the differences in design approaches between our background and the hosting university, the differences in gender, in regional background, in design practice between students and professionals, and so on. Both courses were structured along the same program: a mix of informative/inspirational lectures, hands-on experiences with different tools and techniques, and a design project in which the participants would be able to explore and apply the new insights. All participants received a sensitizing workbook to work with prior to the workshop. Figure 1 gives an impression of the setting of the design course. Figure 2 shows examples of an intermediate result; mapping hidden rules in social interactions.

Figure 1. Experiencing the different elements of the course: lectures, hands-on experiences with tools and techniques and presenting the final outcome of the design projects

In the following paragraphs, we will reflect on our own experiences with this intercultural setting, first by addressing the themes we found relevant for a successful cultural design education, next by formulating how we approached this challenge, to conclude with the insights we gained from this specific theme.
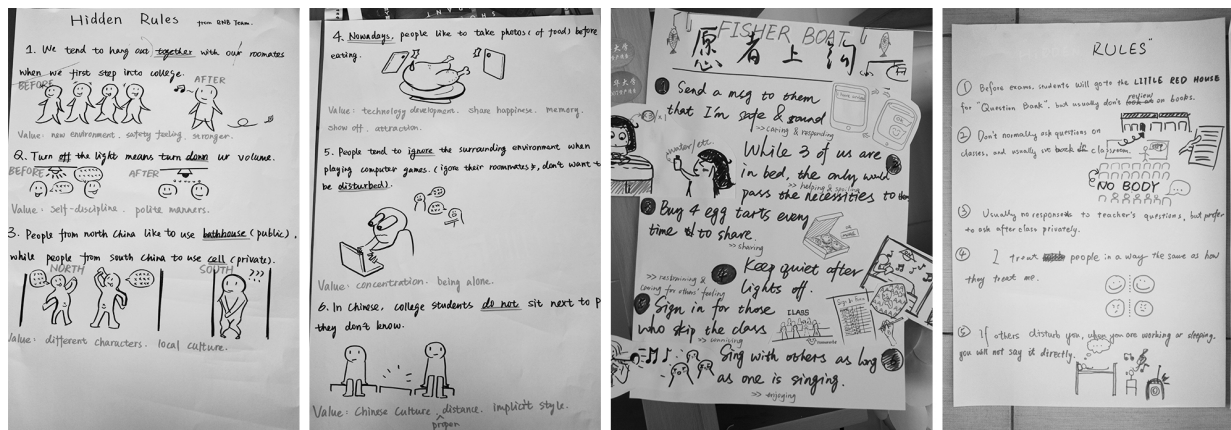

Figure 2. Examples of an intermediate result: mapping hidden rules in social interactions

4.1 Formulating the design theme and design brief

In both courses, the design projects had a specific theme as starting point, to be explored to find interesting insights to design for. For a successful workshop it was crucial that the theme resonated with the cultural background of the participants, that it opened up exploration and design space. Relevant questions in this stage were: does it tune with their frame of reference? Does the theme resonate with their design thinking? Does it spark creative processes? Is it motivating?

To make sure the theme was a good match, we had several preparatory meetings with the hosting design teachers and industry, where we explicitly addressed these possible cultural differences in meaning attribution. We tried out for ourselves how we would approach the theme, and asked the hosting teachers to do the same. After this 'reality check' the theme was decided on. Next, throughout the course we stayed sensitive to the way the theme was approached, and we fine-tuned the theme when necessary (for example enlarging or restricting) during the workshop itself. This asked for a large amount of flexibility of the participants as well as from the teachers, also, this flexibility as necessity was addressed explicitly at the start of the course. In addition, when giving examples, teachers as well as students were conscious that the examples and anecdotes from their own context may not be familiar for other contexts, leading to mutual insights and cultural sensitivity.

4.2 Team building

In both courses the participants would work in groups on the design projects. The structure of the teams seemed crucial to us: do they allow for mutual inspiration, for open-mindedness? Which themes would matter, would enforce or reduce the teamwork? For example: is there a difference in hierarchy, dominance in the group, is there a gender issue, that hinders a lively and rich exchange of experiences knowledge and skills? To address the importance of the structure of the teams, we spent a fair amount of time getting the participants to know us in a playful and informal way. At the same time we addressed the notion of giving constructive feedback, of having an open mind and of daring to be honest. Eventually, the actual teambuilding was done based on the involvement of host university and company, based on rules *we all agree on*, yet with pragmatism. Together with the hosting universities, the insight was that we should not just make random groups, but be sensitive to its dynamics.

4.3 Expectation management

Prior to the actual courses, all parties spent substantial time on expectation management: understanding the aim, the goal and the final outcome of the course. This was addressed in different ways, in different iterations, to make sure all stakeholders were on the same page regarding the intended and desired results. The same sensitivity was developed towards the different roles and responsibilities during the workshop.

To manage specifically the design learning expectations, throughout the whole course, a step by step approach was adopted, where it was okay to not fully understand on forehand 'why' something was

done, trusting that the 'why' would become clear at the end. This in contrast with our own educational approach, where one should have a clear understanding of the bigger picture on forehand. For us, this open minded, trusting step by step approach was an eye-opener that would allow for flow in the project; Also, it was touching for us that we were experienced as to be trusted. Our interpretation is that this trust is based on the visible effort to understand the hidden rules that underline trust in a specific cultural setting. For example, being knowledgeable about our own design approach, and having published about it [17], turned out to be a strong basis for trust.

4.4 Creating engagement
The success of the learning process during the course heavily depends on the level of engagement of the participants: are they involved, engaged, interested in each other, experiencing positive energy? Commonly, design teachers are sensitive to this aspect of design education, and try to contribute through a positive attitude, supporting the freedom to speak up, creating room for individual contributions. In a cultural diverse context, this sensitivity is even more important, because one has to discover the social hidden rules and the diversity in meaning attribution in the educational context. For example, giggling behaviour may be experienced by some teachers as not taking the situation seriously, whereas by others it is experienced as being engaged and enjoying the process. A non-judgemental, open mind, with a genuine curiosity for other cultural values is therefore a prerequisite for creating engagement.

4.5 Interpersonal communication and relationships
The quality of the interpersonal communication and the capacity to built fruitful relationships, is another key prerequisite for a successful course, the language barrier being the most important theme throughout the course. In the first place this can be considered literally: a skilled interpreter is needed throughout the different stages of the course. This may seem obvious, but in both courses we experienced that participants do not always show that they did not understand what was said, although their body language seem to confirm that they did. Also, an interpreter is able to signal if some groups seem to struggle, based on the conversations he/she can overhear when walking around.
To create an atmosphere of trust and an open creative space, it is important to incorporate social activities, such as ice breakers at the start (eating liquorice brought from our home country) and other activities such as, going out for lunch, eating stinky tofu, having drinks together, and so on. And last but not least: sharing our own personal stories to encourage participants to do the same.

4.6 Teaching materials and teaching styles
Many tools and methods are developed within a specific cultural context, and one can question their value in a different context. To explore which tools are appropriate and experienced as meaningful, the explanation of the tools was done with illustrations that were built on the spot, with the materials that emerged from the participants themselves, to make the tools and methods come alive.
Moreover, each step of the design process was represented by a template, which, again, was fine-tuned on the spot to the specific situation. Materials and methods were tailor made to allow for enough structure to get started, and for enough freedom to give it one's own cultural meaning and content.
Next to the teaching materials, the course was dependent on the teaching styles of the design teachers. The comparison between the style of the visiting teachers and the teachers of the hosting university, emphasised the power of outsiders' roles that breaks the routines. For example, the Dong Hua teachers realized they tended to be over controlling/stirring the students during their regular education. The importance of positive feedback and encouragement was neglected. And vice versa, we became aware that positive feedback may be experienced as 'over the top' thereby losing credibility. Again, the success of the style depended on the ability to adapt on the spot to what was happening and how it was perceived.

5   THE FUTURE OF CULTURAL SENSITIVE DESIGN EDUCATION
This paper addresses the importance of cultural sensitivity in design education, first by addressing the importance of this sensitivity, next by describing our experience with cross cultural education. From these experiences, we can conclude on the following insights that may serve as starting points for the future of cultural sensitivity in design education.

Cultural diversity can be acknowledged as enriching and inspiring. To make this happen, one needs to find the balance between adapting to a specific culture, to find connection, and bringing in the new, to offer a new perspective. The question is how to find that balance, how to adapt and yet be enriching, how to be inviting to create a new common ground, a new creative open space. In the above we addressed several themes, based on our experiences, and we believe that more insights from future initiatives will eventually lead to a common understanding of how to develop cultural sensitivity in design education: Learning by doing.

To conclude, we hope that with this paper, we contributed to a positive perspective on cultural sensitivity in design education: cultural diversity is not a problem to be tackled, but a rich source of inspiration in education, to be enjoyed by students as well as teachers.

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