

Issues of Engagement for International Students in Art and Design

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Abstract

This article reports on a Centre of Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) funded project that explores some issues of engagement for international students. The aim of this project was to conduct an in-depth investigation of the experiences of first-year undergraduate international students at University of the Arts London (UAL) through interviewing them in their own first language. Issues emerging include some particularly relevant to art and design education such as the privileging of ambiguity, group work and explorations of personal identity. The article suggests some strategies including Holliday's 'small culture approach' (Holliday, 1999).

Introduction

This article reports on a project that explores in depth some issues of engagement for international students. The genesis of the project was a desire to give voice to the experience of international students in as authentic a way as possible, thus giving universities insight into issues that we would now

regard as issues of engagement. The aim of this project was to conduct an in-depth investigation of the experiences of first-year undergraduate international students at University of the Arts London (UAL). The project sought:

- to assess the extent to which international students integrate and adapt to a different teaching and learning environment, predominantly in the creative arts disciplines
- to identify the causes of obstacles to such integration and adaptation
- to propose ways in which these can be eased.

The research was commissioned by the Creative Learning in Practice Centre of Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CLIP CETL) in 2006.

The University of the Arts has a high proportion of international students. According to UKCOSA it was ranked fifteenth in the list of recruiters of international students in the UK for 2005-6 (UKCOSA/UKCISA statistics); international students were 17% of the total students. If undergraduates from the European Union are included the proportions are even higher - 32% (HESA statistics). The research focused on six geographical areas which supply high numbers of students at the university: Japan, South Korea, Hong Kong, Taiwan, India and the USA (American students were included partly in order to assess the relative importance of linguistic issues in the student experience). Some UK students were

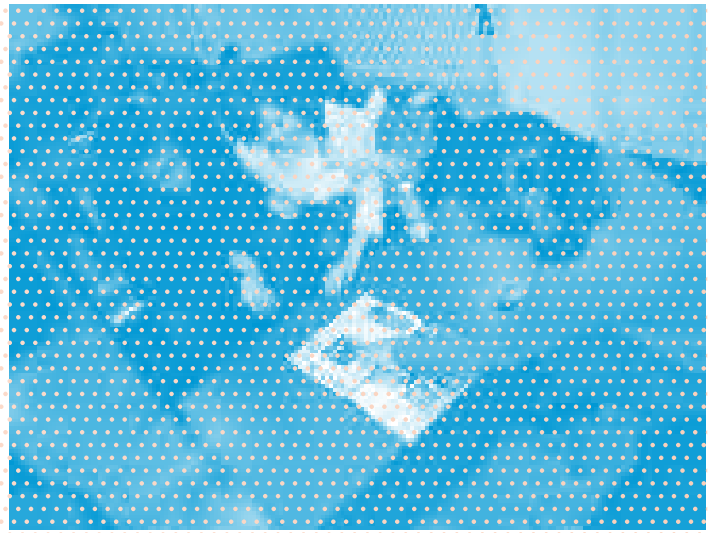


Photo: Kit Friend, University of the Arts London

also included for comparative purposes. A key feature of the project was that the students were interviewed in their own language, by their co-nationals. Fourteen social-science postgraduates were employed from outside the university, mainly from the School of Oriental and African Studies, the London School of Economics and the Institute of Education. The interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed/translated by interviewers.

Before being interviewed, students filled in a short written questionnaire giving basic details about their educational background, time spent in England before studying at UAL, some demographic information, how they heard of the institution, etc. Interviews were semi-structured, consisting of sixteen questions. The questions covered topics such as reasons for studying abroad, expectations, cultural and educational differences in arts and design, friendship, gender issues, stress, support services, etc. The interviewers were consulted during the process of finalizing the questions, to ensure that there were no ambiguities or culturally inappropriate questions. The interview lasted between 20 and 30 minutes. 141 international students were interviewed between January and May 2007. Twenty-one home students were also interviewed, for purposes of comparison, by a native English speaker. The approach of the analysis was both qualitative and quantitative. NVivo and Excel were used as the main tools for analysis, together permitting connections to be made between the interviews and the written questionnaires. To our knowledge this was the largest project of its kind in the UK.

The decision to conduct interviews in the students' own language had both positive and negative implications. The interviews provided rich insights precisely because the language barrier had been eliminated: students could express their thoughts more easily in their native language, and to their co-nationals. The fact that the interviewers were international students themselves also helped; many of them reported that the interviewees saw them as an 'older brother or sister'. The danger, of course, was that a high degree of empathy between interviewer and interviewee might lead to unconscious distortions. Moreover, having such a large multinational team of interviewers also brought

with it problems. They had a variety of approaches to interviewing, and different linguistic abilities. Students' views were thus filtered by the translation process, and some information may have been either misinterpreted or got lost due to poor translation. The fact that the interviewers were not creative artists may also have affected the outcome of the exercise, as they may have been less instinctively insightful of the subject. On the other hand, they might also have been less likely to lead their interviewees in this respect. To an extent these potential problems were dealt with by intensive management of the interviewing process. Weaknesses remain, but we believe that they have at least partly been offset by the richness of the data and the scale of the response which went well over the original target of 60-100 interviews. This was a conscious decision; given the nature of the responses it was felt that volume should be prioritised. If it is not always possible to be sure exactly what a student meant by a particular remark (though this could be ascertained by fresh translations from the original transcriptions), the frequent recurrence of the same points over a substantial number of interviews allow some clear conclusions to be drawn.

The project has highlighted a number of issues (for the full report see Sovic, 2008). First and foremost, there is a strong tendency to treat international students and home students as two different categories. It was not only international students who found this attitude problematic; home students also questioned whether the institution could not have helped more to build bridges between the two groups and serve as a mediator/facilitator, particularly in the early stages of students' transitions to university (Sovic, 2009). Although language is the most prominent divider, the story is far more complex; differences in students' ages, previous educational and sometimes working experiences, and above all, over-idealistic expectations are among the most common factors hampering the transitional process. In addition, many scholars and university staff often ascribe the problems of international students to 'cultural differences', which can be seen as an 'easy option' that allows them to disengage with the complexity of the situations international students have to face in their new educational environment. >>



Photo: Kit Friend, University of the Arts London

Some features of art and design education raise particular challenges. Austerlitz et al. (2008) argue that 'a central, although largely unspoken, tenet of art and design education would appear to be the centrality of "ambiguity" in the creative process' (p. 127); and that 'the fact that this value is implicit rather than explicit in our teaching practices creates vagueness and insecurity for many of our first year students who have expectations based on the concrete and the certain' (p. 127). Austerlitz (2008) remarks that 'the activity in such disciplines...has neither one correct end-result nor one way to get there...Engaging with these open-ended tasks is accompanied by an associated intensified emotional component' (p. 21).

Arguably such privileging of ambiguity can be a particular issue for international students seeking anchors in a challenging and confusing world as they enter UK higher education. What we perceive as autonomy and creativity may be experienced by them as lack of direction leading to a sense of anomie and other negative emotional responses.

A second issue is that art and design education often makes considerable use of group work, and this can take many forms (Sovic and Blythman, 2009). These at times elide into each other in an unstated way. Even within each form, very different interactions can take place. For example, where the group task is discussion to generate ideas leading to individual artefacts, it can move from simply dividing up the work to intense and wide-ranging debate. On other occasions groups might be expected to produce a jointly produced artefact. Protocols of debate and UK styles of operation of power relations are likely to be mysterious and impenetrable for many international students.

A third issue arising from art and design education is the focus on exploration of one's identity through one's practice. This raises again the emotional dimension (Austerlitz, 2008). Austerlitz raises as possible sites for emotions the kind of educational tasks that students are set, forms of communication with tutors who may reinforce ambiguity and the group dynamic with peers. All these provide arenas for exploration of one's identity in ways that may seem culturally

alien to many international students.

However, international students are not the only ones who find this a difficult environment in which to flourish. The issues raised may sound familiar to those working in the fields of widening participation and diversity in art and design education, as well as those focussing on transition points and the first year experience.

Challenges in the classroom are thus inevitable and numerous: class discussions, group work, presentations, independent learning and the 'academic freedom' associated with tacit knowledge are among the hardest aspects of the learning and teaching process to which international students have to adapt, often in a relatively short space of time. Inclusive pedagogy that focuses on the similarities rather than the differences between students is needed for effective learning. Adopting what has been described by Adrian Holliday as a 'small cultural' approach seems to be the way forward. As he argues,

In the newly forming small culture of the classroom group, each member will bring small culture *residues* from other educational, classroom, collegial and peer experiences. Indeed, it is this characteristic of small culture which underlines its *non-essentialist*, *non-culturist* nature....In a classroom group made up of a range of nationalities...cultural residues will be brought from many "national" or "ethnic" experiences; but commonalities of educational, classroom, collegial and peer experiences from all these contexts will be the building blocks for the new small culture (Holliday, 1999, pp. 248-9).

We would be surprised if any of these issues are unique to our university. The literature, educational press and anecdotal evidence all suggest that the experience of international students in the UK is often far from happy and productive for them. Through our methodology we have been able to gain considerable insight into the students' perceptions and experience. It is in everyone's interest in UK higher education to gain greater understanding of the perspectives of international students.

As well as raising awareness, the project has given us evidence for a number of forms of intervention. The challenge this offers those of us responsible for improving the quality of teaching and learning in the UK is significant. Interventions could include the following:

- a better match between language support for international students and the language requirements to be a successful student, including working in groups with home students.
- language awareness staff development activities for academic and support staff.
- staff development activities that aim to enable participants to experience what it might feel like to be an international student.
- awareness-raising activities with all staff that we operate in a global environment and that this requires cross-cultural understanding and empathy.
- enhanced activities for students in induction/orientation to make as explicit as possible what is expected of a successful student in the UK.
- work with home students to raise awareness that they too are joining a global world of employment, and that successful communication in English with people who do not have English as their first language is as much their responsibility as it is of the international group.

These issues are not unique to international students. The literature suggests that they are also pertinent to students from working class backgrounds, minority ethnic groups and those with disabilities. It is also likely that any such changes in ways we work will benefit all students.

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Further information about the project can be found on:
<http://www.arts.ac.uk/clipceti-internationalstudents.htm>.

Biographies

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Dr Margo Blythman is a visiting research fellow at the Centre for Learning and Teaching in Art and Design at University of the Arts London. She is currently working on the evaluation of teaching and learning projects that make significant use of social networking tools and the experience of international students.

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