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Cross Cultural Projects

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Introducing projects that are cross cultural into the curriculum and classes allows for moments of radical departure from expected routine. It's the chance to shake things up. These moments – or weeks as they turn out – foster an understanding of the “other” and inform the students' design practice.

Today I will share the strategies, challenges, and best practices from the cross cultural projects that I have taught in Mexico and in the United States.

Motivations

My design research focuses on investigating and critically analyzing representations of identity that are manifested in visual culture – in Latin America and México in particular. What are the rhizomatic social, economic, and ideological networks underpinning (visual) culture?

OK – I don't expect everyone to get so excited about this. BUT when I think about it students often have a misconception that because they either surf the WWW or travel during the summer they are global citizens. There is one thing to see the world, but another is to learn how to communicate with and for others and to position one's self in an intercultural framework – one that tries to break away the hierarchies and lends itself to a humanistic and inclusive approach.

The MIRA Project in Mexico

design and ethnographic methods

Yucatán – a transcultural tourist region.

It is rapid immersion

program developed as a collaboration between students and faculty experts

Visualizing the Huichol Concept of Time

Conducted in junior level class - "Image & Illustration Class"

junior-level class in graphic design.

This is a collaboration with Dr. Sarah Corona, Social Communications, Universidad de Guadalajara. Sarah has worked with the indigenous community in San Miguel ___ in the high sierra for over a decade. I wanted my students to benefit from working across cultures and Sarah was interested in developing a calendar that would visualize the oral tradition of the Huichol concept of time that could be distributed for use in classrooms of Mexican public schools in Jalisco and Nayarit. We needed to bring Sarah here – as the client and intermediary – to share her insight. To do this, we obtained funding from the University of Florida and she came here for a week. She presented two public lectures on contemporary Huichol culture to students and the larger UF community and spent quality time with the graphic design students to further explain the project from her point of view and answer questions. The students had done some preliminary research on Huichol culture but Sarah was key in mediating their understanding.

So here we have 16 students, most of whom had never been to México much less to this geographically isolated indigenous community, working on a project that would advance an intercultural dialogue. Huicholes must know the Mexican calendar and concepts of time in order to live and work in urban México, yet most Mexicans know very little about what guides the Huichol calendar. These misunderstood cultural values and belief systems create tension and division. In this sense, they are conceived of as a strange or exotic "other." simply because their traditions are undocumented. Dr. Corona has worked with the Huicholes and through interviews has established that their concept of time is not marked by precise dates and times as we know them but is based on natural events that are rooted in their agricultural tradition. It is not an understatement to say that their survival was for centuries dependent on their ability to read and make sense of natural signs such as the arrival of a bird, the beginning of a rain, or the blossoming of a flower.

First and foremost they focus on concepts of culture that emphasize AGENCY and RESPONSIBILITY. When I work on projects in Latin America – I find students often have the initial conception of the "poor" or "pitiful" other. For example, if one is a "real Maya" then he or she is primitive and not part of the modern world. But it is so much more complicated than this and these projects are designed to counteract these misconceptions.

These projects focus on creating an understanding of Mexican culture that goes beyond Univision, Corona ads, or tourism advertisements. Once we learn more about the other Mexico, we can begin to think about the complexity of culture in this large country and how to communicate about and for that space.

We established a project brief with guiding concepts:

Reciprocal

Didactic

Ethical

Comparative

Engaging

The Target Audience

- 1 Mexican and Huichol students (13–18)
- 2 Teachers and professors
- 3 Huichol families

The students worked in groups to develop prototypes for six calendars.

Our FUNDAMENTAL QUESTIONS

How can we ethically and responsibly represent Huichol concepts?

How can we use our design skills to engage and speak to the “other” (Mexicans and Huicholes)?

Then there’s the obvious question of how we can design for two “others”

We developed a list of BASIC QUESTIONS

What do you want to see (what is a positive representation)?

What don’t you want to see (what is inappropriate, unethical, stereotypical, too difficult to understand)?

Are there signifiers we should be aware of (color, language, icons)?

Are there problems we should be aware of?

With this project, we situate both cultural conceptions of time on the same plane, thereby equalizing their positions.

Specifically, we considered how to use communication and design methodologies to teach Mexican, including Huichol, youth concepts central to the Huichol community (“others” in this region), and how US North Americans can ethically and responsibly represent Huichol concepts in Mexico.

Additionally, the international component of this project required students, most who had never been to Mexico and who have narrow understandings of indigenous communities, to think outside the box in terms of representation, language, economic and cultural disparities, and “otherness.” For the students, it was the opportunity to expand their research abilities and stretch their design thinking – putting research into practice through this collaboration.

Sarah’s second session with the students blew many of their ideas out of the water and this was a good thing. She was constructive but in being honest about what she thought would and would not work – this provided the students a renewed sense of freedom to ask questions they did not feel comfortable asking the first day. It also created more questions which was valuable for the students.

After 2 weeks of work, we sent Sarah a PDF file with concept statements and prototypes for one season. She in turn presented these to the group of Huichol teachers she was working with. They selected one concept that they felt strongly about. We had expected to do many more iterations, but according to Sarah, they felt several of the prototypes had potential and leaned towards the circular model. They then discussed the importance of presenting this to community leaders to get permission to disseminate the calendar. This happened several weeks later – and the community leaders also selected the circular calendar as the one they would like to produce this year. This is due in part to the narrative nature of the illustration and the relationship of the symbols to those that the Huicholes themselves use in their handicrafts. These are also largely understood by the Mexican population. As such, we use a known language to communicate an unknown concept. At the end of this month, I am traveling to Guadalajara and then to San Miguel to present, with Sarah and one of my students, the calendar to funding agencies and to the Huichol community leaders. Sarah's initial comments were that we do not need to present the final version. However, our concern as designers is in wanting those who are primarily invested in the calendar to have a voice BEFORE it is mass produced. We expect some changes to be made and want to make sure we get the story right. So this chapter will be continued.

Students comments were very positive about the experience. Some admitted to being totally uninterested in this project from the beginning. But as they got further into it, they found points of interest and connection to other work.

Several comments that stand out are:

The conversation with Sarah made us really consider how a culture wants to represent themselves.

They saw how design can be used for the public good – in a very tangible way.

Design is not only a visual problem – it is embedded in culture.

They had a deep consideration for the client – more than they have had with US based clients. This provided a tangible opportunity to feel they were making life better through design.

Given the time today, I will talk about a few of the primary challenges I've had in working cross culturally and then some best practices.

The primary challenges of these projects are providing a framework that allows for:

An understanding of both the complexity and significance of the design project.

The MIRA project is optional and thus it became a challenge to recruit the right students. Later some thought it was an easy way to get credits out of the way. There is still the allure of the exotic – the beach – whatever

The Calendar project was inserted into the class as a required project.

A fundamental understanding of the cultural issues and concerns (ie– how does one understand the intricacies of culture if one is not from there?)

Setting up a framework was necessary to understand the context. This has to come primarily from the clients or those for whom one is communicating. There are a wide range of ways to integrate cross cultural projects into the classroom – but from my experience the most effective relies on the voice of the other. Someone who has that lived experience and can tell their story.

Overcoming language barriers. How does one become cross cultural if one does not speak the language. The Calendar project required a lot of translation work. This became even more difficult because of the the different Spanish and colloquialisms of the Huichol teachers who provided the calendar narrative in Spanish. It took a lot of extra explaining, patience, and time to communicate. But we all helped each other and students should not be discouraged from participating in a project because they do not know the language.

Knowing that new questions will arise and having the time to address these in the design process (allowing for iteration based on new discoveries and client feedback). Cross cultural projects often require more iteration than those within one's own culture.

Best practices:

I must be invested.

work with someone who understands the culture

Choose projects carefully

The more specific the project the better.

In the case of MIRA, we had umbrella projects to help the students frame their own.

Set up the appropriate expectations AND methodological + ideological framework

Context – students need visual materials, readings, lectures, and discussions

(take care of different types of learners)

What is the process? The logistics?

Collaborative

Local “owner” + myself (willing to make mistakes)

Partner students with each other so they are not lost on their own

All the above together

Listen to what people are saying.

Teach students to ask questions that are open and not leading

Observe if possible. This can be done through listening as well.

Don't assume - Don't take things for granted - Do not be judgemental

Take advantage of any opportunity or connection that presents itself.

Do not think you can control everything

Know that everything will always be incomplete and imperfect