DESIGN CAN CHANGE THE WORLD

Bernard J Canniffe
bcanniffe@mica.edu
Maryland Institute College of Art Baltimore USA
Peter Chomowicz
pchomowicz@mica.edu
Maryland Institute College of Art Baltimore USA
Nanci Takeyama
ntakeyama@ntu.edu.sg
Nanyang Technological University Singapore

1. Brainstorm between American and Emirati student on what is considered private X public

Abstract

The age of "Globalization" has ushered in a great debate on the value of an interconnected planet. In an effort to better understand and participate in this debate, faculty from the Maryland Institute, College of Art in Baltimore, MD and Zayed University in Dubai, UAE brought their students together for a three-week, project-based, team-based, cross-cultural encounter. By making a personal connection to diverse individuals through a common language of art and design it is our hope to equip the next generation of visual thinkers with the necessary tools to shape this debate for the betterment of all.
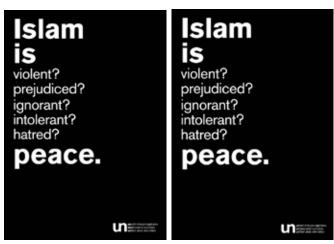
Key words

Introduction

In June 2008, a group of female Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA) art and design students traveled to Dubai in the United Arab Emirates. The purpose of this trip was to interact and engage with female design students from Zayed University on a 21–day cultural emersion and cross-cultural bridging course between the two schools.

Project Description: Baltimore and Dubai are both cities that were established mainly because of their access to the ocean and sea. The water connected them to a greater world outside their landlocked borders as the ships imported and exported cultural diversity and understanding as well as trade. One could argue that the coastal highways became early vehicles of conducting the flow of information. The building blocks of what would become the worldwide web. East and West, and North and South are becoming less significant as we embrace the global economy yet as we embrace a vastly changing and complex market place we run the risk of moving further and further apart. We are breaking down so many barriers and at the same time we are building so many walls. Art and Design have never been so important to understanding these paradoxically different socioeconomic shifts, and art and design education has a pivotal role to identify, translate and connect these cultural chasms.

This course explored our collective understanding of what it means by the term "Globalize" as it is applied to economy, culture, and world. We looked at and discussed the role of the media and socioeconomic structures that factor into cultural significance. We discussed how tensions arise between cultures and how these fractious situations might be prevented.

The USA and The Middle East have similar and also different worldviews and cultural beliefs, each coming from different countries, cultures and political, social and religious backgrounds that inform and shape your understanding. Prejudice, bigotry and stereotypes are at the local and international level and they always lead to one group being marginalized and misunderstood.

In this course design played a role in building cultural bridges and preventing myopic views from occurring. This cultural dialogue created very strong and personal bonds among students and results were very gratifying.

2. Posters created for unveil campaign

Group 1: Unveil

Unveil is a print campaign that used Arabic lettering and English typography to dispel myths about the Muslim religion associated with promoting terrorism. The one-color posters invited the viewer to engage with the statement by asking them to select the appropriate word from a list provided on the poster and thereby complete the statement.

For Example: ISLAM PROMOTES: HATRED
                                 WAR
                                 TERRORISM
                                 PEACE

Secondary typographic and calligraphic information stated the correct answer for the above statement. The posters were to be viewed at hotel lobbies throughout the Dubai metropolitan area and at the Dubai international airport lobby so that visitors to the country would read the messages. These primary delivery vehicles were not achieved due to the short time span of the work phase of the cultural exchange. What did happen was that students decided to include their final poster images on their blog and we held a small presentation and exhibition at Zayed University on the last day of the project phase.

3. Videos regarding 'What is an Arab'

Group 2: Piece together

The purpose of this project was to interview people about people's perception about Islam and Arabs. Their initial idea was to create a website where people could post their own videos talking about their own ideas and views to create a wider discussion through videos. Due to the fact they got very little response, they decided to go outside and interview people. At the end most of people who agreed in being in front of cameras primarily people on the Zayed University campus, ZU students interviewed their family member and some tourists. Students should be mindful when embarking on cultural team-based experiences that they have to be aware that it is difficult for them to get outside their cultural comfort zones to address complex projects. Whilst we must praise this student group for tackling a complex project we must be mindful that their intent did not match idea.

4. Posters created for 'I am free campaign'

Group 3: I am free campaign

The idea for this project was to create a vehicle that focused on why people fear each other. The plan became to break down perceptions and identify similarities between cultures. The project used clothing and language as an expression of understanding. Video was used as the delivery vehicle and two students appeared in the production; one

was Emirati and the other was America. The Emirati student appeared in various headdresses and face coverings and spoke in Arabic. The America student spoke in English and wore traditional American traveling clothes. Both students spoke about where they came from, their culture and the Emirati student spoke English and the American spoke Arabic towards the end of the video. It became clear to the viewer that both girls were the same and there wasn't a need to fear people because of the way the dressed or spoke. The "I Am FREE" slogan became a representation of this experience. It is important to note that the video was shot entirely in black and white. This was done to allow the viewer to understand that both girls looked the same and to also allow the viewer to focus on the content of the project and not get distracted by the colors.
The group also produced an accompanying print campaign where they asked the viewer to fill in a word in the end of a statement.

The video was launched on the You Tube site and was watched by many people throughout the word. What was fascinating about this project is the dialogue that this project that this video created and continues to create on the You Tube site. This project has truly become international and is forcing people to address some important questions and beliefs.

The Statement read: I AM and asked the viewer to complete the sentence. Some people wrote 'strong' and others wrote 'proud' and 'independent.'

5. Posters created for 'Unfiltered communication'

Group 4: Unfiltered communication

The process and progress in this project was informed by a series of discussions and conversations about the dichotomy between cultures and people. As the project proceeded in time, the dialogue became smaller and smaller in scope, and more specifically about Western culture vs. Emirati culture, and why there had been tension

within the MICA-ZU project specifically. There were two solutions: ignore or address. This group chose to address the differences in cultural etiquette and moral standards, our religion, faith and spirituality, how we love and whether our actual actions as people and as countries reflect these parts of our culture.

This group had struggled a great deal to bond and connect. This group disconnect had initially forced the students to remain in the conversation phase and not move into the ideation and creation phase. The final printed pieces became the cornerstone for this group to understand and accept each other's differences. The process became the awakening of cultural tolerance and acceptance. Their struggle became their strength and design became the vehicle to express their understanding. One of the students in the group who came from Holland stated at the end of this project, "You know, in the end, we are just girls."

6. Posters created for 'Plasticnation'

Group 5: Plasticnation

The United States of America and the United Arab Emirates are thriving economically yet there are barriers that separate the two countries. Through design we will educate the Global community on these differences, which pertains to equality and beliefs. Through education and understanding, unity may be achieved. Through the exploration of misconceptions, with the use of surveys, false opinions and prejudices will be exposed. After there exposure and analysis this blog space in addition to graphical elements will help to educate the global community about the essence of both countries.

After looking at the results of the first two surveys we compiled three more. These are short open-ended questions that are meant to explore misconceptions.

About USA
This survey is intended to explore other nation's perceptions of the United States of America.
1) What is your nationality?
2) What is your gender?
3) What is your age?
4) Have you ever been to the United States of America?
5) Do you know where the United States of America is located?
6) Are American citizens superficial and ignorant?
7) Do you think Americans think Arabs are terrorists?

8) Are Americans overly concerned with their appearance?
9) Do you think American girls have boundaries?
10) Are Americas over weight?
11) Do you feel discriminated against by Americans?
12) Do you think America is helping the world?
13) Does America control the world?
14) Do they think they do?
15) Do you think the media is responsible for misconceptions?

About the United Arab Emirates.
1) What is your nationality?
2) What is your gender?
3) What is your age?
4) Have you ever been to the United Arab Emirates?
5) Do you know where the United Arab Emirates is located?
6) Do you think Emaraties are extremists?
7) Are Emaraties Terrorists?
8) Do Emaraties support terrorism?
9) Does the UAE live a primitive life?
10) Do women in the UAE have freedom of expresstion?
11) Are Emarati women oppressed?
12) Do Emaraties dislike Americans?
13) Is the UAE becoming more conservative?
14) Is the UAE lead astray by the media?
15) Do you think Americans believe Emaraties are terrorists?
16) Do you feel discriminated against by Emaraties?
17) other comments:

Full projects can be seeing in the following sites

http:/zumica1.wordpress.com
http://scad2.wordpress.com
http://attackonfear.wordpress.co
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TMtxbhopkts&feature=related
http://unfilteredcommunication.wordpress.com
http://plasticnation.wordpress.com

Video

To document this experience, we created the following video to summarize the experience and promote a continuation of these efforts in the future.
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qm_UTTYFxyg

Conclusion

It is always difficult to understand what success is in these types of cultural and educational undertakings. As educators we have a responsibility to ensure that students' are kept emotionally and physically safe when we take them to distant lands and cultures. We also must provide students with a framework that will enrich their education and foster creativity and also provide them with final grade that reflects their individual commitment and group participation.

We question if success is defined by the creativity and execution of the final project or are we analyzing the relationship between the individual and group interactions? Is success bringing students to different cultures and allowing them to interact with people who have grown up and lived in the country where we are staying? How do we provide students with the necessary skills to operate in an interconnected world? And how will faculty be rewarded for taking these risks that are essential in training artists and designers to become global problem solvers and world ambassadors? On this trip we took a video documentary team with us to record all student and faculty cultural and educational interactions. It was hoped that the final documentary would help us understand the answers to the many questions we have regarding the future of design and art and design education. It is hoped that the documentary will help inform this story and allow us to reach out to other countries and cultures and carry out similar projects. It is hoped that the documentary will become the promotional tool that represents what success is.

One thing is clear and that is that there is a need to continue this projects and we were all so impressed with the wonderful energy generated by this project that we decided to follow up with the creation of the 'Majlis Society'. Majlis is the Arabic living room where people meet to exchange ideas. We would like to continue to promote cultural exchange and understanding through design partnerships as social contribution. More information about The Majlis Society can be found at: http://majlissociety.org/