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# ENGLISH CORNER: FOSTERING INTERNATIONAL STUDENT COLLABORATION THROUGH E-LEARNING TECHNOLOGIES

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper focuses on a CEPAD (Centre of Excellence for Product and Automotive Design) 'Framework for International Student Collaboration', and highlights the technological, cultural, and educational challenges and opportunities for sharing experiences, ideas, and support amongst students and staff. The globalisation of automotive and transport design industries has increased opportunities to engage with and operate within international communities of practice. In turn, this has necessitated accommodating strong cultural differences in learning styles moving from tutor-led to student-directed, problem-centred approaches. This study demonstrates how a Boat Design module has been used as a primer for a model of Coventry University design pedagogy which aims to help prepare students and staff who will visit Zhejiang University of Media and Communications (ZUMC), Hangzhou, Peoples Republic of China in March 2009. The approach utilises social-networking tools and videoconferencing systems, and picks up on key cultural moments to help develop relationships and understanding of cultural aspects of designing and learning between two partner institutions.

At the heart of the framework is 'English Corner', a collective and multi-faceted set of activities involving Facebook discussion, face-to-face networking between United Kingdom (UK), European Union (EU), (for the purposes of this paper these groups will be referred to as home students), and Peoples Republic of China (PRC) students enrolled in Coventry School of Art and Design (CSAD), and regular online meetings with peers and tutors in China. Strengths of this framework include offering students the chance to: discuss cultural and design issues; promote a mentoring role within student-peer activity; support students visiting the UK; help home students who are preparing to visit China, and managing and supporting them during their time in China; and help tutors explore different approaches to teaching.

*Keywords: Internationalisation, design pedagogy, e-learning, collaboration.*

## **1 INTERNATIONALISATION AND THE DESIGN CURRICULUM**

This paper explores how CEPAD developed part of its Internationalisation strategy during preparations for taking home students on a teaching and learning exchange with ZUMC, and a staff visit to Nanjing University of Science and Technology (NUST) in March/April 2009. Home students will travel with their tutors, who will be delivering a short teaching package with students at ZUMC, and will also take on mentor roles. It highlights how a module in Boat Design has been used as a primer for a model of Coventry University design pedagogy which aims to help prepare 30 level 2 students and staff for their visit. We will discuss internationalisation and the development of a framework for international student collaboration known as 'English Corner'. This is a multi-faceted approach to enabling effective collaborative experiences for Art and Design students across international boundaries. It does not rely on one single method but a blend of learning techniques and experiences that have grown out of the pedagogical developmental practices of CSAD in general, and in particular of its Industrial Design department. In the University's international development forum CSAD's international aims are articulated as: developing and consolidating high quality partnerships with international universities; undertaking collaborative work with international partners resulting in reckonable outputs, and building recruitment to its programmes. Coventry University aims to ensure that students gain from the national and international learning communities in which it operates. These

policies are enunciated in various forums, for example, the CSAD annual Business Plan, the policy statements of the University's International Development Committee, and the University's Corporate Plan [1].

'English Corner' supports these strategic aims at a practical level with a set of teaching-related activities that can help staff and students to enrich cultural awareness and diversity. It also aligns with the CEPAD aims to reinforce a dynamic learning experience both locally and globally, and use computer technologies to enable students to develop their spatial design intelligence within a culturally diverse context. The objective is to enhance engagement with the community of international industrial design practice [2]. CEPAD has developed a research strategy to help inform the School's International Strategy which, in conjunction with institutional policy, aims to help students to develop an openness towards, and an understanding of, global markets [3]. The point is succinctly put by Owen: 'The reality of world markets and world communications makes it mandatory that design researchers, educators and practitioners establish global networks of interactive communication for institutional self-interest as well as for economic stability' [4].

Osmond (2008) explains the context in which Industrial Design graduates join a community that is both international in scope and encompasses professional designers working in industry who negotiate and participate in mutually understood discourse – a discourse that is explicit, often tacit, but where the characteristics of membership are unmistakable [5]. What is significant in this context is that the community is global. The need for strategy has grown out of the recognition that embedded within the community of Industrial Design practice is the need to be able to appreciate and embrace culturally diverse situations, experiences, and influences. CEPAD strategy aims to help an increasingly diverse student body that is drawn from Europe, the East Asia, the Americas, and South Asia, recognise, value, and communicate the cultural foundations of their design work to their global community of practice (COP) with understanding and respect for other cultures [6]. Fundamentally it is concerned with exploring teaching and learning opportunities that will embrace cultural diversity and enrich the curriculum by exploring effective and innovative approaches through digital communication tools.

The Industrial Design programme within which Boat Design is situated aims to bring students to a point where they are eligible to enter the boat design industry. This is informed by a conceptual framework of learning drawing on notions of situated cognition, and the COP theory of Wenger [7]. It is considered that learning within a COP can transform who a student is, and what a student can do, and participation in the course is an experience of identity formation. It is recognised that the course offers more than the accumulation of skills and information, and enables students to become a creative and critically minded practitioner. This is a transformative practice that leads to the development of a professional identity and the inculcation of a desire to become accepted within a community of creative design practitioners. As a result, learning becomes a source of motivation, meaningfulness, and personal and social energy [8].

Boat Design has a twenty five year history at Coventry University. It has developed from a fairly esoteric subject, situated in a larger suite of Product and Transport Design programmes, to emerging as an established and identifiable community of design practice with many graduates who are energetically and intimately involved with the global boat design industry. During their undergraduate years most students undertake design industry placements of at least three months. Coventry Boat Design students, already developing a strong affinity with their boat design COP, will be in a position to bring their experience, identity, and understanding to a global context and to broaden their own cultural experiences.

## 2 CONFUCIAN AND SOCRATIC MODELS OF LEARNING

In order to develop an effective framework it is necessary to consider the very different pedagogic traditions to both learning and design identified in UK and PRC universities. A simple distinction will here be offered between Confucian and Socratic models of teaching and learning. At PRC governmental level much interest has been shown in Western models of teaching and learning as exemplified by the use of classroom methods such as induction, discussion, workshop, and participation (broadly speaking, the methodologies of independent and critical thinking). Since late 2007 considerable interest in Western models of teaching and learning has been shown by Chinese educators but twenty five centuries of learning habit are not easily discarded, nor would we propose they be.

That said, Confucian styles of teaching and learning hold that the student must take some responsibility for their learning. As Anping Chin has recently remarked: ‘Education, in his [Confucius’] view, must begin with the person who seeks to learn. A teacher cannot make it happen. A person must desire it so strongly that he goes and looks for a teacher, and he must realize that in applying skills and knowledge he has learned, he is also reaching an understanding of himself’ [9]. Nonetheless, it is still the case that the dominant teaching style within Chinese schools and universities is a Confucian, fundamentally didactic, approach to teaching and learning based on ancient cultural and political models that stem from the time of Confucius, but not solely from him, and philosophers of the middle and late Zhou eras. Within those eras education consisted primarily of rote learning and memorisation of Classics without the requirement to demonstrate the ability to either theorise or challenge a particular premise [10]. This approach positioned the teacher as master of learning and encouraged students to replicate the subject matter of learning by a monologic approach.

One fundamental (dare one venture wilful?) misreading of Confucian pedagogy is that it seeks to maintain the student in a permanent position of subordination to the superior teacher. This is not the case. Confucian teaching seeks to educate the student in and from a position of learning by steady and immersive replication but with the aim that that selfsame student will, having once obtained an age of chronological, intellectual, and emotional maturity, emerge as a qualified learner, take their wings and fly. Daniel A Bell has worked for a number of years at Tsinghua University, Beijing. Examining a PhD candidate’s thesis one time, Bell was presented with a succinct summary of this approach: ‘according to traditional Chinese ideas, the task of the student is to learn about the world until age forty or so, and only then try to critically examine that world’ [11]. Initially taken aback by this proposition Bell quickly re-thought it: ‘Upon further thinking, however, I realized that [this] view was not as preposterous as it seems. In fact, it may stem from a long tradition of Confucian thinking about education, and that tradition may have some merit in the contemporary world’ [12]. Nevertheless, for the purposes of this paper, we will persist with the characterisation of Confucian teaching and learning methods as monologic, and Socratic methods as dialogic.

Identified within this study is the opportunity for Chinese students to experience contrasting learning models more akin to Western design learning and especially Socratic Andragogy. Andragogy is described by Knowles as a learning approach (see Tab. 1) that is centred on the art and science of helping adults to learn [13]. It engages the teacher and students in dialogue and confrontation, through which the student elucidates understanding. This dialogical approach has the potential to offer adult learners a greater degree of engagement with creativity.

*Table 1. Knowles Principles of Andragogy (1977)*

1. His self-concept moves from one of being a dependent personality towards one of being a self-directed human being.
2. He accumulates a growing reservoir of experience that becomes an increasing resource for learning.
3. His readiness to learn becomes oriented increasingly to the development tasks of his social roles.
4. His time perspective changes from one of postponed application of knowledge to immediacy of application, and accordingly his orientation toward learning shifts from one of subject-centredness to one of problem-centredness.

The Socratic learning model may help synthesise the monologic and the dialogic. It is centred on systematic questioning and inductive thinking; it is a way to channel learners’ thought processes and to embed understanding. This approach is often focused on managing a student’s thought processes along predetermined paths through rigorous and logical dialogue in order to validate ideas [14], harnessing students’ experience and existing knowledge to solve simple or complex problems and issues posed by questions that are set. Within a Socratic seminar, for example, students are required to act in a variety of thought-demanding ways to explain, evidence, generalise, apply concepts, analogise, and represent ideas in a new way [15]. Indeed, the teacher, in a classic Socratic sense, will not necessarily (unlike the Confucian teacher) adopt, or speak through or from, their own educational, philosophical, or ideological positions. In a classic Socratic practice, positions utterly anathematic to the teacher will be adopted, voiced, and promoted, to ensure the student body thinks for itself, by virtue of reacting to the often extreme (often absurdly extreme) positions adopted by the Socratic educator. These approaches, sit alongside pedagogic approaches traditionally centred upon instructor-focused education where instructors assume responsibility for making decisions about what will be

learned, how it will be learned, and when it will be learned [16]. In other words, much has been learned in this project of intercultural learning, learning about different cultural learning methods, and reflection about cross-cultural pedagogic synthesis.

### 3 ENGLISH CORNER: A FRAMEWORK FOR COLLABORATION

It was decided that a framework for international student collaboration [See Fig. 1] was necessary to take strategy into action. Accordingly, ‘English Corner’ therefore utilises a range of social networking tools, practical and orientation events and activities. The framework has three key phases: cultural orientation; tutor guidance and mentoring in relation to design activity; and, workshops, peer review, and seminars to draw together design thinking and activities. In the context of this study the framework has two distinct areas of activity. The first is to teach European design studio practices to Chinese Boat Design students at NUST. The second is to teach boat design to visually literate Animation students at ZUMC. This is the scenario where the framework demonstrates its greatest potential. The second activity incorporates a model of student mentoring to introduce European design studio practices and subject specialist knowledge, to students with no prior experience of the subject.

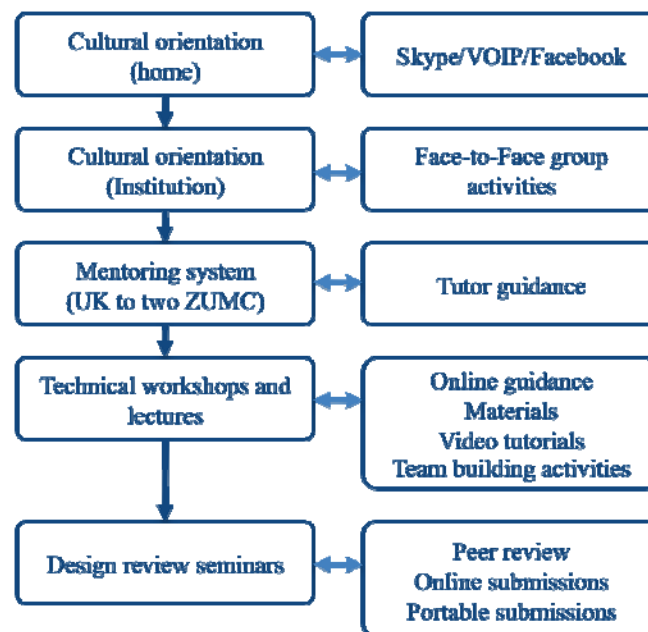


Figure 1. Overview of the English Corner Framework

The orientation phase is centred on the use of Facebook discussion and information-sharing; face-to-face networking amongst home and visiting Chinese students, and regular online meetings with peers and tutors in China. Key strengths of this framework include offering: home students the chance to meet and discuss both cultural and design issues with Chinese peers; support for exchange students visiting the United Kingdom; help to home students who are preparing for, managing and requiring pastoral support during their visits to China, and the provision of help to tutors (including visiting professors to the UK) to develop experience with ways (and differences) of working and to build ideas for project teaching and engagement. This model of working has also been adopted by the CSAD International Development Co-ordinator who actively seeks links and exchange opportunities with international institutions around the world.

The framework was launched with initial engagement between UK and PRC student groups by face-to-face conferencing tools between CSAD and ZUMC. The use of Facebook has been essential to create a student-driven forum for discussion on cultural differences and design influences, contextualized through a repository of videos and weblinks. The open platform for virtual face-to-face communication is underpinned by a range of network located resources such as video-based tutorials with voice-over in English.

#### 4 EUROPEAN STUDIO DESIGN PRACTICE

At ZUMC Chinese students with no experience of boat design will work in teams with home students to explore European approaches to design thinking and processes by designing a 40ft sailing yacht. Bench-marking activities will promote a user-centred design approach to product analysis, leading to debate within the groups on the merits of existing designs and future design opportunities. A presentation of the final design concept, including design and development work, benchmarking research and technical understanding, will be delivered by the group. The structure of these activities is shown in Table 2. This process will be repeated at NUST with students who, because they have experience of boat design, will take place in a reduced timescale of five days.

*Table 2. Teaching activities at ZUMC*

Day	Morning Activity	Afternoon Activity
1	Lecture: introduction to boat design	Form design teams (1 home student with 2 ZUMC)
2	Bench-marking and internet research	Bench-marking and internet research
3	Lecture: Ergonomics and user-centred design	European studio design practice
4	European studio design practice	European studio design practice
5	European studio design practice	European studio design practice
6+7	Cultural visit	Cultural visit
8	Tutorial: CAD for hull design	European studio design practice
9	European studio design practice	European studio design practice
10	European studio design practice	European studio design practice
11	European studio design practice	European studio design practice
12	European studio design practice	Final group presentation

#### 5 CONCLUSION

International student recruitment has been an economically healthy bi-product of CSAD's international engagement. Central to this international project has been the need, in educational terms, to engage with shifting global and economic perspectives of Art and Design, especially in relation to Industrial Design. To pretend to any student that they do not belong to, and should not seek to participate in, a global community of work practice would be grossly irresponsible.

'English Corner' utilises social-networking tools such as Facebook, Skype, Chat and more embedded institutional VOIP videoconferencing systems to help develop relationships and understanding of cultural aspects of the design process between two diverse institutions as a precursor to the module taking place. During teaching a Facebook group 'ZUMC in CSAD' will be used for teacher support, feedback and group discussions. It will be used for peer review of scanned sketch work and CAD renders. Students in the UK (including visiting Chinese students) were shown how to use tools such as video recorders in order to make short films and interview staff and other students. This was aimed at helping students develop reflective approaches to observing their academic and cultural activities. These are ultimately going to be shared on Facebook and the students in China will be encouraged to explore similar techniques when the UK tutor is teaching Boat Design at ZUMC.

Students have also uploaded videos of both English and Chinese cultural events such as the 30th Anniversary of ZUMC celebrations. Staff and student have posted interviews on Facebook to present a range of social and cultural issues for discussion. The use of blogs has helped co-ordinate social and cultural activities such as the exhibitions of Chinese art held at Coventry. For example, the launch event for 'English Corner', timed to coincide with the anniversary celebrations, established Skype as an effective technology for videoconferencing. Students have used Facebook to develop familiarity with their peers in the two universities. It has also helped Chinese students currently studying in the UK to integrate more effectively with their UK peers. The major advantage of Skype is that it is a freely available, student-centred technology whereas the VOIP system requires room booking and tutor/technician support. Skype is flexible and open access and our trials have shown that the VOIP system can be coupled to Skype by using an AppleMac laptop making it useful for peer group review. It is evident that the use of social-networking tools enabled good cultural orientation between the UK

and Chinese institutes because they are based on technologies that students have experience of and confidence in using in their everyday lives. In many cases students are developing their own practices of engaging with such tools independent of teacher direction making the transition easier when participating with academic networking activities. The greatest challenge is the operational windows of communication due to time difference, however, the informal character of international social networking tools such as Facebook has made cultural integration easier because there are known methods of sharing images, text and media that are less constrained by cultural formalities. There will be another paper reviewing the effectiveness of the Socratic Andragogy proposed here, developed within a reflective learning model, in order to optimise its further implementation.

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