THE INTERCULTURAL DESIGN CAMP - A COLLABORATIVE ADVENTURE IN DEVELOPING INTERDISCIPLINARY PEDAGOGY AND “INTERNATIONALIZATION”

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Abstract

The Intercultural Design Camp is an innovative collaboration, which also represents an important developmental stage in the evolving relationships of a group of European higher education institutions coming to terms with the realities and demands of “internationalization” and interdisciplinarity. There are currently four partner institutions within the cluster: University College Arteveldehogeschool, Ghent; Stuttgart Media University; Linköping University and the University of the West of Scotland.

The project developed from a period of collaboration and consultation on the development of a larger scale joint post-graduate programme. This gave rise to interesting proposals, which met some stumbling blocks in terms of funding and compatibility of systems. It was decided to adopt a more proactive philosophy and use a brief intensive collaboration as a means of testing and “kick-starting” the collaboration. Accordingly, the first Intercultural Design Camp was established in September 2009 at Münsingen a former military camp in the Swabian Mountains, now a unique environmental site where Stuttgart Media University has a base. Challenges included the cultural differences, methods of thought and working practices of students from different countries - but perhaps just as importantly, different disciplines. Digital Art students from Scotland, Graphic Design & Communication students from Sweden and Information Design, Print and Media Publishing students from Germany had surprisingly different ideas of how to respond to the relatively open brief and had to develop effective ways of working together in international, interdisciplinary project teams.

The process was as important as the product – in this case cross-media projects addressing and embodying aspects of intercultural communication. While the students got to know one another in enforced proximity, staff was able to observe other teaching styles and discover more about their partner institutions’ organisational approaches.

What emerged from this pilot was a clear sense that this brief but intensive collaboration – within the context of longer established institutional relationships – has lasting benefits and has already acted as an effective catalyst for further innovative developments in learning and teaching within the individual institutions and between institutions. A measure of the success of the Design Camp is the increased willingness of students to move to undertake ERASMUS exchanges - rather than requiring a ‘leap of faith’, students are going to work with people they already know. One student was able to develop work for his Honours Creative Project from the Münsingen experience.

The pilot assisted greatly in the success of a bid for funding from the EU for an intensive course, which will come into play in 2011 with the Design Camp in Sweden. The methodology of the Design Camp has also informed the development of the collaborative modules at UWS which have in turn assisted in the development of the Design Camp 2010.

The range of direct and indirect reciprocal benefits this collaborative model offers is assessed, including opportunities for developing staff research collaborations on practice-based and pedagogical research with continuing analysis of practitioner output and the student experience. The consolidation of the Intercultural Design Camp and potential expansion of the network will be considered.

Keywords: intercultural, interdisciplinary, pedagogy.
1 INTRODUCTION: CREATING A MICRO COSM OF EDUCATIONAL COLLABORATION

The Bologna Declaration of 1999 at once reflected the need for a European Higher Education Area and structure which would encourage the exchange and mobility of staff, students and ideas, pedagogies and innovation while also providing an inbuilt imperative for this. In the decade since, many institutions have grasped this initiative whilst simultaneously struggling to move towards fulfilling the spirit and wider ambition of Bologna and associated programmes such as ERASMUS. There is a Spanish proverb which translates something like: “one thing is thinking the bay horse, another thing is saddling him”; and for most Higher Education institutions in Europe there is an increasing realisation that the desire to be at the forefront of international exchange and innovative intercultural initiatives in education is an aspiration which requires a great deal of hard work and hard decisions to bring to life.

Clearly, most institutions have embedded the central ideals and aspirations of Bologna in their strategic aims. For example from the current partnership; Linköping University (LiU) has an Internationalization vision and mission 2006-2011, which commences with the following:

“Linköping University shall be known as a university with high international visibility that functions as a principle driving force in a knowledge-rich cosmopolitan region…

Enhance relations with prioritised universities…

Increase international mobility of undergraduate and graduate students, faculty and staff with the purpose of increasing quality of education and research.”[1]

With this in mind three of the current Design Camp partners, Stuttgart Media University (HdM); Linköping University (LiU) and University of the West of Scotland (UWS), initially met to discuss the possibility of developing a joint masters in the broad area of creative media. There were three main drivers behind what became the International Masters in Sound, Screen and Music initiative (IMiS): the existing bi-lateral partnerships between Linköping and the University of the West of Scotland (then University of Paisley) and Linköping and HdM Stuttgart; the desire of all three institutions to develop international post-graduate provision; and the realization that there was a competitive strength in combining the resources and staff pool of each institution to provide a richer student experience; interdisciplinary as well as international. Underpinning these discussions and initiatives was the sense that not only was there the potential of European Union (EU) support for such initiatives there was a directive from the EU to enact such partnerships. As we can see from the recent update of Bologna, the ‘Budapest-Vienna Declaration on the European Higher Education Area’, where Article 10 calls: “upon all actors involved to facilitate an inspiring working and learning environment and to foster student-centered learning as a way of empowering the learner in all forms of education, providing the best solution for sustainable and flexible learning paths. This also requires the cooperation of teachers and researchers in international networks” [2]

The IMiS initiative was very much in line with current thinking on European educational integration and innovative educational practice. Yet, handy acronym though it is, the title and the scope of the programme proved to be the subject of much discussion and in the course of this it became clear that while there was a mutual willingness to collaborate, the external and internal pressures which affected each partner institution, and each member and department involved in the collaboration could not be underestimated - and were clearly raising some unexpected obstacles. Simple things like aligning semester dates, conflicts of schedules, different levels of corporate structure and above all, the inevitability of day-to-day local demands and workloads overriding longer-term strategic partnerships. Eventually, following some setbacks in developing the IMiS project the three partners reflected on the relationships and common cause that had been developed in the process of these meetings and planning sessions and decided to run a pilot collaboration to develop and test the partnership in a proactive manner: a brief intensive course which would take the form of a Design Camp bringing students from the three institutions together as a means of “kick-starting” the wider collaboration and a departmental and institutional level. The progress made with the IMiS programme and the desire to see a form of collaborative interdisciplinary masters programme or even concurrent programmes in each institution alongside associated internal and external factors - not least as indicated above, the Bologna process itself, - ensured that the concept of interdisciplinary collaboration to develop an international educational partnership greater than the sum of its parts - the defining principle of the
IMiS initiative - was maintained in the development of the Intercultural Design Camp.

Accordingly, the first Intercultural Design Camp was established in September 2009 at Münsingen, a former military camp in the Swabian Mountains, where HdM Stuttgart Media University has a small base in one of the many relatively empty buildings in what has become a unique ecological site and where HdM Stuttgart installed a temporary computer network with iMacs and wifi. Challenges in establishing this project included the cultural differences, methods of thought and working practices of students and staff from different countries - but perhaps just as importantly, different disciplines. Digital Art students from Scotland, Graphic Design & Communication students from Sweden and Information Design, Print and Media Publishing students from Germany had surprisingly different ideas of how to respond to the relatively open brief and had to develop effective ways of working together in international, interdisciplinary project teams.

2 THE CONCEPT OF THE DESIGN CAMP

From the initial discussions it seemed important that the Design Camp represented a break from the routine experience of both students and staff. Admittedly, given the limited budgets available for this experimental project, developed swiftly and put in to action with the minimum of bureaucratic process, the free if somewhat rudimentary student accommodation available at HdM’s Münsingen camp base was also a consideration. The combination of physical isolation and geographical location in terms of a creative retreat proved ideal ground for the propagation of close-knit creative teams from quite disparate human elements. Once within the camp the students lived and worked together twenty-four hours a day and apart from occasional excursions their focus was on both the fulfillment of the creative brief and getting to know each other; their creative talents, technical abilities and methods of working as well as the range of individual personalities.

2.1 Settings

The recruitment of students for this first design camp was to some extent planned and to some extent dictated by circumstance. Applicants were asked to write: “a short written/visual proposal, (approx 1000 words or an appropriate image equivalent), which will outline an approach/solution to the […] brief.”

It proved to be easier to recruit strong interest from students from Linköping and UWS who were interested in the notion of coming to study in Germany, than to get local students from Stuttgart to sign up to a week’s hard work in the nearby mountains, which meant that the selection of HdM students was slightly skewed towards the Information Design/Business and Print and Media Publishing side, which again reflected the principal staff input from Stuttgart for this first project. However this proved to be an interesting proposition in itself as the very marked difference in approach between the students from this background with highly developed computing and technical skills and a very business-like focused approach to responding to briefs and completing tasks in comparison to the Digital Art students from Scotland with a more abstract and elliptical approach to developing creative solutions was at once a challenge and in the end a considerable site for innovative creative fusion, while the Graphic Design students from Linköping tended to sit somewhere between these positions.

Once all the groups had arrived at Münsingen, and following a highly effective ice-breaking workshop supervised by HdM’s international officer Martina Schumacher the student cohort was split into international interdisciplinary groups with the nationalities distributed as evenly as possible.

The brief for the first design camp at Münsingen 2009 was relatively open stressing the importance of a cross-media response with an emphasis on media production. It asked student teams to:

“Present an innovative, creative Media Product which will help raise awareness of the concept of Expanding Communities and Inter-Cultural Mobility.”

As a guide to reflecting on this task participants were asked to consider the following aspects of the task:

– What is a Community? Could it be: Global, Local, Physical, Virtual, and Viral?
– How are our Communities expanding and evolving within the context of international mobility?
– What methodologies/platforms are being used in order to achieve intercultural mobility?
– What are the personal/social/political/economic implications of expanding communities?

Amongst the mandatory requirements were that students in the creative teams:
– Collaborate across a range of different media types.
– Co-operate with students from each partner Institute. [3]

2.2 Process
From the outset it was recognized that the process of the design camp – in terms of the development of the creative process, the transmission of cultural approaches and the process of negotiating and working towards a common creative solution incorporating different experiences and standpoints was very bit as important as the end product. The student experience was the primary consideration: What would each individual take home from this intensive experience? How would they use it to feed into their continuing creative development as their more general coursework in their home institution?

The week was structured into formal sessions and time for group work – often this spread into the evening. A number of keynote lectures which included topics such as Colour Theory and Symbolism, Narrative, Story and Plot, sparked debate and suggested creative approaches.

One of the core deliverables specified in the initial Münsingen brief was the requirement that student teams should, “make a full presentation of their project on the Friday morning of the event, demonstrating not only the stage they have reached, but also future plans for allocating tasks for the production, completion and presentation of the final product.” As the camp developed it became readily apparent that regular interim presentations of group progress provided valuable opportunities for feedback, comment and discussion. As the week progressed it also became clear that the initial enthusiasm for these presentations was waning somewhat, and indeed some groups were suffering from an overload of staff feedback, which at times proved contradictory. So with hindsight, it was decided for the Design Camp at Dumfries 2010 to find a point at which there was no risk of students “over-presenting” their ideas and staff over engaging in feedback while retaining a sufficient overview of progress and sufficient input and guidance.

What also emerged was the extent to which students from different countries and different backgrounds were encountering new pedagogical approaches as they engaged with staff from the other institutions and staff were also able to observe different styles of interaction with the student groups from their colleagues – all of which has the potential to create more diverse and interesting approaches to learning and teaching.

The secluded situation and the ready availability of equipment next to accommodation meant there was little distraction and group work continued often well into the small hours of the morning after the communal evening meals. These were a great success with all students and staff eating together and national themed evenings, which allowed staff and students to share ideas and get to know each other.

2.3 Outcomes
The variety of final projects from Münsingen included such concepts as "The Book", an art-focused project which involved the production of a physical "Book" which would be passed from place to place left at random in public environments with people encouraged to check in with a social-media web site as well as make contributions to "The Book" itself and record its physical progress. All in all, there were several different combinations of technology and artistic and creative including print media, Web 2.0, digital video digital photography, print output and even a physical exhibition located on the grounds of the camp.

The Web 2.0 elements allowed for continued contact between students beyond the camp itself and this seemed something which the Design camp should actively encourage. This became built into assessment with an extra ECTS point for follow up activity.

It was particularly interesting for staff and students to see the variety of final project presentations embodying quite different combinations of ideas and work processes with some useful space for
reflecting upon the creative process itself.

One thing clear from Münsingen was that the social milieu within which the Design Camp took place was important factor in its success – on reflection it seems unlikely that such a collaboration could have succeeded so well had there not been quite strong existing personal links between at some staff developed through the preceding discussions and meetings regarding IMiS and other initiatives which extend to those links between the institutions and participating students.

Another success was the interaction between a wider group of staff from the three institutions and the ability to witness some teaching in action and so realize some of the strengths of the other institutions and points of coincidence and common interest which had not previously been realized. Above all the reactions of the students meant that all staff concerned came up with the unanimous verdict that the collaboration must be sustained and developed.

It also became apparent, that one week is not much time for the relatively complex collaborative projects, which the brief calls for and which the students want to produce to develop and extend their skills and experience. Especially, considering the initial requirement for the international groups to discover effective strategies working together. This was not surprising given the different backgrounds of the students. At the end of the week it was agreed, that the next Design Camp in Scotland would incorporate forms of electronic communication to allow the students to make contact with one another and discuss ideas before the camp starts.

2.4 Progress between Münsingen 2009 and Dumfries 2010

Plans were made for the further development of the Intercultural Design Camp. A fourth institution, the Arteveldehogeschool in Ghent joined the partnership, and preparations made for the second Intercultural Design Camp to be held in Scotland. Again it was felt that it was important to run the camp away from the main home campus so that staff and students from the home institution did not simply get caught up in their day-to-day commitments, but were removed and in a relatively secluded location. The multi-campus nature of UWS proved useful here, as the camp was located at the Crichton Campus in Dumfries – which UWS shares with other institutions. The relatively rural situation – though admittedly not quite as remote as Münsingen – with the campus slightly removed from the town of Dumfries again proved successful.

The brief while remaining relatively open was tightened up and a format more closely aligned with the location of the design camp developed, providing something of a format, which it should be possible to “re-engineer” for each coming design camp transposing the format to suit different local settings and nation/international contexts. As a starting point it took the strong connection between Dumfries and Robert Burns – an international figure in his own time and ours as a starting point for the examination of various conceptions of Scotland:

TO SEE OURSELVES AS OTHERS SEE US

‘O wad some Power the giftie gie us To see oursels as ither see us’, ‘To a Louse’, Robert Burns.

Using the above Robert Burns’ line as a starting point, the aim of the Intercultural Design Camp is to deal with the following topic: “Packaging Tourism: Interrogating representations of Scottish Identity”. The students could find their own way to respond to the general topic or focus on one of the suggested areas of investigation: Exhibiting Scotland (Stereotypical images of Scotland); Scottish Visual Representations; Scottish Literary Representations; Scottish Landscape. [4]

Possibly reflecting the opportunity to make contact with each other in advance and to research and engage with the topic over a longer period, the project work in response to this brief was very accomplished with one group providing a particularly sophisticated response combining verses of poetry with photography and video taken in the course of the Design Camp, (including a visit to Scotland's capital, Edinburgh), in a multimedia installation with a specially composed soundtrack and multiple projections as well as large printed 2D images.

Alongside preparations of the Design Camp 2010 in Scotland the partnership sought funding to be able to bring the Design Camp Concept to the next level. In order to take account all the lessons learned from the Design Camp in Münsingen it was recognized that this would involve extending the
duration of the camp and using other locations, which not only offer the possibility for conceptual work, but also allow on-site media production. The hire charges for such locations tend to exceed affordable fees, so the now four partners for the Intercultural Design camp made an application for Erasmus Intensive Programme funding.

This was successful partly it was felt due to the experience of Münsingen which had tried and tested the partnership, and also tested the concept. This will be held in Sweden in 2011.

3 LASTING BENEFITS

The successes of the Intercultural Design Camps in Münsingen 2009 and Dumfries 2010 have been significant – one of the key aims was to improve mobility and students and staff exchange which the Design Camps clearly succeeded in doing. They also inspired further student exchange – with the first such exchange taking place between University of the West of Scotland and Stuttgart. It has been very difficult to get students from UWS (other than language students) to undertake Erasmus exchange, partly because of the language issue where few students in the UK are fluent in a second language and with other factors such as the element of social inclusion in the UWS student cohort. Two students from Linköping University have committed to an exchange for the winter term 2010 at Stuttgart Media University, while two students from the HdM will go to Linköping the next year for a semester as exchange students.

The development of the Design Camp has benefited from and also inspired extended staff exchange - with Tommie Nyström undertaking a year’s exchange in Stuttgart which put him in a strong position to co-ordinate Münsingen 2009 while Prof. Dr. Frank Thissen who provided one of the keynote lectures there has gone on to undertake an extended exchange in Linköping. The impact of such staff exchanges spreads far beyond the individuals. The impact of the Design Camp has also been detected in a number of individual student projects. One UWS student Steven Sherlock was so taken by the environment of Münsingen, the intensive experience of the Design Camp and the historical and environmental setting that he incorporated material from the Design Camp, and other research and visual material subsequently provided by HdM staff in his final year creative project, which is summarized as follows:

Rationale - 5,51 is a video project that originates from participation in a design school in September 2009 – based in the former military camp of Münsingen, southern Germany. It has progressed as an inquiry to investigate the trip from an experiential perspective and has evolved as a response to explore the concept of transformative identity through a past, present, future. This identity has expanded to form a triangulation that encompasses Physical Site and Self Intervention. [5]

Beside these enhanced forms of cooperation on a more personal level, there have been a number of enhancements at a department level. For example, there have been revisions to the Information Design degree programme at the Stuttgart Media University allowing Information Design students to bring the ECTS points gained at the Design Camp or at other International Summer Schools in their student records. UWS have also taken steps to allow this to happen through the provision of a generic International Project module. So these international courses become part of the curriculum of the study programme, which is a first step towards the idea of a joint international programme originally expressed by the IMiS project. Again, this demonstrates the efficacy of strengthening cooperation at project level, before starting to build a joint international degree programme.

One benefit of the Design Camp, which is continuing to develop, is its facility and a site for researching and developing pedagogy both within individual institutions and across the partnership. This can become a useful and necessary adjunct to the development of the Intercultural Design Camp and potential associated future post-graduate provision.

The pedagogical methodologies developed for the ICDC 2011 take note of the experiences of the last two Design Camps and encapsulate the approach developed over the two previous camps focusing on flexible team working and the importance of transferable skills:

One of the major challenges of teaching in first cycle programmes is not only to teach knowledge but also to convey how this knowledge can be applied in the working life. Hence to combine theory and practice is one very important aspect of modern teaching. Especially in the field of media design and
production it is not a feasible approach to teach by means of demonstrating and reproducing. In this very creative subject area it is important to teach methodical and systematic skills more than factual knowledge. Another important aspect is a team-oriented teaching. Most of the work in the media field is done by cooperative teamwork; one person alone can perform nearly none of the tasks in a media project. As a consequence the students need not only professional skills, but also so-called soft skills. These are sometimes even more important to the successful accomplishment of the project work.

According to this concept, the Design Camp addresses students from the different partner universities from first cycle programmes. Applicants should be at least in the second year to ensure that they hold basic skills, which can be developed and intensified throughout the Design Camp.

The pedagogical strategies being developed through the Design Camp enacts elements of current thinking which acknowledges the important role of what Diane Medlicott terms super-skills:

in devising the activities and assessments for your module, of course you must build in the acquisition of technical and pragmatic skills, and these will generally relate to the learning outcomes you have had to specify. This leaves a space at the top of the design for what can be termed ‘super-skills’. They are somewhat abstract, and they are difficult to measure in a deeply meaningful way, but they are vitally related to employability, and to the enriched growth of the whole person; and once experienced, they tend to be internally embedded in the learner and transferred to other learning experiences. [6]

In broad terms the Intercultural Design Camp provides a student experience which also fits with Unesco’s "Guidelines on Intercultural Education":

The distinct aims of intercultural education can be summarized under the headings of ‘the four pillars of education’ as identified by the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-First Century. [7]

These four "pillars of education " are: Learning to know; Learning to do; Learning to live together; and Learning to be.[8]

The relatively holistic approach developed in the Design Camp reflects these concerns but as noted below one element that the partnership is actively considering is a focus on increasing the breadth of the Intercultural component of the Design Camp, which at the moment is restricted to Northern Europe. As we have seen this was a necessary corollary of the way the project has evolved but having established a relatively secure basis for further developing the Intercultural Design Camp it is probably desirable that active measures will be taken to increase the scope of intercultural interaction within it.

4 OUTLOOK

Although the concept of the Intercultural Design Camp has proved to be successful, it has not yet reached its full potential. One possible path to develop the concept is to broaden out the network to new partners in southern/eastern Europe and/or perhaps even outside Europe, to encourage the intercultural aspects of the concept. An alternative to broadening the partner network could also to open the Design Camp to students from other than the partner universities. So the intercultural aspects of the concept will be emphasized but organizational drawbacks due to a large unwieldy consortium will be avoided.

So, this is only the beginning of the story not the end. The positive feedback from the first two Design Camps in Münsingen and Dumfries has inspired the partners to go ahead and to lift the Camp to the next level. The idea is to expand the degree of collaboration by modern communication and collaboration systems. So the new Intercultural Design Camp concept is subdivided into three phases: Phase 1 - preparation, Phase 2 - The Design Camp; Phase 3 - analysis, completion and continuing collaboration. In Phase1 the students will get in touch via videoconference systems like Adobe Acrobat Connect Pro and share initial thoughts and ideas on the brief. Phase 2 - The Intercultural Design Camp itself is characterized by intensive face-to-face communication and collaboration. At the end of this phase the different student groups will come up with an elaborated concept that responds to the brief. Phase 3 will include continuing contact and collaboration with some of the students will moving on to produce the media products as part of their bachelor thesis or other project work at their home universities.
If this concept works within the setting of the Design Camp it might also be used as core experience to start to transfer it to the degree programmes of the partners. It is conceivable that sections of the curricula of the different partner universities might follow the same 3-phase schema developed for the Camp. So each university could offer their students courses, which are not present at their home university. By integrating more of such courses in the curriculum a larger scale joint post-graduate programme be achievable; so from the original IMIS collaboration by means of the evolution of the Intercultural Design Camp a set of new ambitious and inclusive international post-graduate collaborative programmes may emerge in the not-too-distant future.

In "The New Academy", Boekraad and Smiers lament the demise of "genuine "international collaboration. They note that in contrast to the international movement of the nineteen-twenties which saw "a pronounced desire for a renewal of the arts and society that would not be tied to nation, history or patrimony" present ideas of internationalization have "other roots:

*It is more a matter of broadening the horizon for students and bringing about institutional collaboration on the part of the academies. It is no longer the teachers who travel, it is the students who take part in exchanges. Genuine collaboration between academies or departments across national borders is rare. [9]*

The present authors contend that the Intercultural Design Camp and the developing partnership, which has established it, is a "genuine international collaboration" and is at least a step on the way to the "new academy".

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