

## ***Global Creative Competency: Multi-disciplinary and cross-cultural workshops as a means to strengthen work-ready skills for Honours students in creative arts & design***

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### **Biographies**

**Lisa Scharoun** is the co-founder and leader of the Cross-Cultural Design Lab and an Assistant Professor in Graphic Design at the University of Canberra. Her research and teaching focus is on global graphic design strategy and understanding the impact of international design study tours on employability. She has exhibited her design, photography and fine-artwork in the United States, UK, Australia, China and has won numerous international prizes for her work. Lisa is also a board member for Design Canberra.

**Fanke Peng** is the co-founder of the Cross Cultural Design lab and course convener of Fashion at the University of Canberra. She is an interactive media designer and researcher who has been involved in many research projects in the UK including: Technology Strategy Board (TSB) project: 'Monetising Fashion Metadata and Fashioning Metadata Production Tools,' Engineering and Physical Science Research Council (EPSRC) project: 'Research in the Wild,' and an Arts & Humanities Research Council (AHRC) funded cross-disciplinary research team on 'Past Present and Future Craft Practice.' Fanke is also a board member of CraftACT.

**Bethaney Turner** is the Convenor of the Bachelor of Arts and Design (Honours) degree in the faculty of Arts and Design at the University of Canberra. Her current research explores how more sustainable urban living behaviours can be developed and fostered in a time of human-induced climate change. Her work draws on multidisciplinary research methods and cross-cultural perspectives.

### **Abstract**

Honours is an intensive year that requires students to develop advanced disciplinary knowledge, high-level research skills and demonstrate these competencies through completion of an independent research project (Manathunga et al., 2012). It is often seen as a very discipline specific pathway to further academic studies. Through providing multi-disciplinary and cross-cultural learning experiences however, the skills gained in an Honours program can be applied to direct work-ready skills, thus offering alternative career opportunities beyond the traditional academic pathway. In our Creative Honours program at the University of Canberra, we have a focus on enhancing Cultural Intelligence (CQ). Cultural Intelligence can be defined as an individual's ability to function in various cultural contexts, and comprises a set of capabilities that include metacognition, cognition, motivation and

behaviour (Wood and St. Peters 2013, 561). Strong CQ skills are seen as an asset in many fields but particularly in the arts where career paths do not always have a strictly defined skill set and often rely on graduates to be flexible and adaptable to many varied work situations (Haukka 2011). To foster and enhance employability skill sets such as CQ, we have set up a multi-disciplinary study tour to China in which Australian students from varied disciplines such as Creative Writing, Graphic Design, Industrial Design, Media Arts, and Cultural Heritage collaborate in a series of workshops with Chinese students from a similar range of disciplines. Through an analysis of one of the workshops presented during this tour, the paper aims to show how multi-disciplinary and cross-cultural experiences can foster work-ready graduates and can therefore be a key part of an Honours program in creative arts and design disciplines.

**Keywords:** Arts and Design Education, Multidisciplinary learning, Cross-Cultural Design, International Study Tours.

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Honours courses can offer a very discipline specific experience in which high achieving undergraduates develop high-level research skills and demonstrate these competencies through completion of an independent research project specific to their area of specialisation. According to Graduate Careers Australia (2016), Australian Honours degrees vary per institution but are usually a one- to two-year research program following the completion of a Bachelor Degree in the same field. Some institutions combine the honours program as the fourth year of a four-year bachelor's degree, and in others it is considered a postgraduate year because a bachelor's degree can be completed without it. General consensus is that it is meant to be a program for 'high achieving' students and can be a pathway for a research career in academia.

Particularly in institutions where the honours degree is combined with a four-year bachelor degree, the programme is very discipline specific and rarely encompasses multi-disciplinary collaboration. In the faculty of Arts and Design at the University of Canberra we have created a program in which students from all of our faculty's disciplines take collaborative units that allow for multi-disciplinary co-mingling of processes and ideas. Multidisciplinary learning environments have been described as 'trading zones' (Mills and Huber 2005) where a convergence of tacit knowledge occurs. "Scholars are busy simplifying, translating, telling and persuading 'foreigners' to hear their stories and try their wares," explain Huber and Morreale (2002, 19). "In this zone, one finds scholars of teaching and learning seeking advice, collaborations, references, methods, and colleagues to fill in whatever their own disciplinary

communities cannot or will not provide (Ibid., 19).” Our approach, described more in-depth below, encompasses a mix of traditional research skills training coupled with multi-disciplinary and cross-cultural experiences that enable multiple pathways for students.

### **Creative Honours Education – our approach**

A creative honours programme is meant to empower students to become knowledge creators and enable them to engage in a transformational experience, both academically and personally. Rather than taking a deficiency model approach (Wingate, 2007), we view each student as entering honours with a set of skills, resources and goals with our job being to mentor students through a self-reflexive process that enables them to make these explicit. Our key focus is then on providing the tools, pathways and support that enable students to select the most useful suite of skills and personal development necessary for their future career pathways, either in a professional context and/or in ongoing research.

Honours is an intensive year that requires students to develop advanced disciplinary knowledge, high-level research skills and demonstrate these competencies through completion of an independent research project (Manathunga et al., 2012). Thus, Honours is identified as a transitional year, a time when students are required to move from being knowledge acquirers to knowledge makers (Ibid., 2012), a highly attractive trait for future employers (Kiley et al., 2011). However, the academic challenges of Honours also induce highly emotional experiences and concerns, positioning this degree as one that also facilitates transformational academic and personal experiences (Allan, 2011).

Our teaching philosophy in Honours is driven by recognition of it as a transitional and transformational space that is experienced differently by each individual student due to their particular economic, social, cultural and disciplinary context. We identify the personal and academic development of Honours students as a collaborative, iterative process and strive to create the most effective academic and social contexts to enable each student to maximize their potential. This extends beyond us as individuals to encompass the Honours cohort and the broader research culture of the Faculty and the University. We believe that core to success in Honours is the creation of a strong, cohesive cohort that is able to provide peer-support and strengthen engagement with the course and the University within a nurturing and encouraging environment

### **Employability skills in the Arts and Design disciplines:**

Employability skills remain challenging to define, particularly in the creative industry disciplines. Through a reference group that includes local and national industry bodies, this research involves explicit engagement with employers from this sector to identify key skills the project aims to measure. To initiate this process, we draw on Smith et al.'s (2014) dimensions of employability outlined in the ALTC (2013) funded project *Measuring the impact of WIL on student work-readiness*: (1) Collaboration and team work, (2) Informed decision making/information literacy in context, (3) Commencement readiness, (4) Lifelong learning, (5) Professional practices and standards; and (6) Integration of theory and practice.

According to the Grattan Report on higher education in Australia (Norton, 2013) current Australian graduates lack relevant 'soft skills' that make them attractive to employers. In the report Norton cites interpersonal and communication skills as one of the biggest issues in finding suitable candidates. The Australian Government is now calling on universities to attend to this deficit and improve the employability skills of graduates. This issue, and the need for universities to develop pedagogical practices and design student experiences that remedy it, has been shown to extend to Honours and postgraduate coursework programmes (as evident in the OLT-funded project *Higher Degree Research Training Excellence: A Good Practice Framework Final Report*, Luca & Wolski 2013). At the same time, student mobility overseas is being identified as increasingly important for the development of global work-ready graduates as well as enhancing the internationalisation of Australian campuses (see OLT funded *Bringing the learning home: Programs to enhance study abroad outcomes in Australian Universities*, Gothard et al. 2012). Recent UK and European based studies indicate that student mobility improves these 'soft skills' and is positively correlated with improved employment outcomes of graduates (UK Higher Education International Unit 2015, European Commission 2014).

Cultural Intelligence can be defined as an individual's ability to function in various cultural contexts, and comprises a set of capabilities that include metacognition, cognition, motivation and behaviour (Wood and St. Peters 2013, 561). Williams and Best explain (2014, 242) that the most significant element of cross-cultural awareness is 'the ability to be open to new ideas and have the capacity to change such ideas when necessary.' Strong CQ skills are seen as an asset in many fields but particularly in the arts where career paths do not always have strictly defined skill sets and often rely on graduates to be adaptable and flexible to many varied work situations (Haukka 2011). The importance of high CQ is essential in an increasingly globalised world, and CQ capabilities form a major component of the 'soft skills' employers desire in university graduates (Norton, 2013).

Research demonstrates that one way to significantly improve CQ is to give students exposure to overseas travel so that they can experience a culture significantly different from their own (Lipsett, 2008). Australian students are more likely to select short-term exchange than a semester-long exchange program. Data from the “Australian Outbound Student Mobility Snapshot” (2015) indicates that over 50% of the international study experiences from Australia are for less than a semester, while only 6.5% are for a year. Many universities have long-established short-term study tours in the areas of business, management and tourism; however the number of short-term overseas study programs in creative arts programs has grown exponentially in recent years thus highlighting their popularity and potential to attract students to tours in this area. There is evidence from UK and European-based studies (UK Higher Education International Unit 2015, European Commission 2014) that student mobility, both in their country of origin and overseas, increases employability skills such as interpersonal, communication and coping skills for students.

CQ skills are not only important for employability, they are also essential for creating a balanced society. “Most Australians now accept cultural difference as the basis upon which to construct a new national identity ... it is realised that Australian culture is a differentiated one, comprising a multitude of cultures emerging from different customs, beliefs and social and economic backgrounds and artistic traditions (Gunew and Rizvi, 1994).” An understanding of different cultures and an ability to deal with them are essential functional skills in this rich cultural environment. In the arts, the importance of high CQ skills is especially crucial. Rizvi (1994) notes: “In my view, the arts, much more than any other school subject, can contribute to the development of the imaginative critical faculties that are required for this task [of dispelling ethnocentric views].” Multi-disciplinary workshops, with an emphasis on interpreting human behaviour, coupled with a short-term study program overseas, could offer a quick and effective means to increase the CQ of creative arts students. Ethnocentric views, explains Cohen (in Gunew and Rizvi 1994), “cannot be tackled by simply giving students access to alternative sources of experience ... rather it is a question of articulating their lived cultures to new practices of representation, which make it possible to sustain an imaginative sense of social identity and discourse without recourse to racist constructions.”

### **Case Study: '48 Hours in Shanghai'**

From the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> of November, 2015 participants from Shanghai Jiao Tong University, Guangxi Arts University and the University of Canberra came together at the Changpu Art Space on Shaoxing Road in Shanghai to work together finding cross-cultural solutions to the

problems of ageing in Shanghai. Workshop participants were selected on their cultural backgrounds enabling Australian and cross-China (Shanghai and Guangxi province) perspectives. Participants were selected from a range of creative disciplines: architecture, graphic design, industrial design, creative writing, communications, media arts and cultural heritage. This mix of disciplines allowed for a more vibrant creative response as a larger knowledge pool enabled knowledge sharing across a variety of creative fields.

On the first day of the workshop, participants were given lectures by experts on this topic, Professor Zhang, a specialist on ageing at Shanghai University and Richard Bruckbacker, founder of Collective Responsibility, a charity group in Shanghai that facilitates community involvement in aged care. Participants were then led through a guided design thinking exercise in which they mapped their personal experiences and understanding of ageing. During this exercise, Australian and Chinese responses were reviewed as a means to show overlapping cultural experiences and observations. Participants were then placed into cross-cultural groups with a mix of students from Australia, Shanghai and Guangxi province. Once in groups participants were tasked with brainstorming and creating 'mind-maps' as a way to visualize what they had learned from the lectures and the initial design thinking exercise.

Over the remaining 24 hours, students worked together to generate concepts and to create digital prototypes. The solutions were then printed on large posters for display in the Chungpu Art Space and members of the community were invited to see the works and comment on them via a 'comment wall' where they could write their thoughts and/or experiences on ageing in Shanghai at the front of the gallery.

Participants created a range of concepts that all dealt with issues of significance to the ageing in Shanghai. Through a process of discovery, interpretation and innovation over a very short and intensive period of time, they were able to bridge cultural and linguistic barriers to create highly innovative solutions. The five prototypes displayed in the *48 hours in Shanghai* exhibition show a surprising depth of understanding of the issue, cultural concerns and human needs. Participants were given only a short period of time (48 hours) and were posed with a topic about which they had not previously undertaken any extensive research. They were drawn not only from cultures that are significantly different (Australia and China) but also from different areas within China itself, since we selected not only participants from Shanghai but also regional participants from areas of Guangxi province in Southwest China. Another element that made this process unique in comparison to a conventional workshop was that the participants were drawn from multiple creative disciplines such as creative writing, architecture, cultural heritage, graphic design, industrial design, media arts and

communications. Whilst some of these discipline areas quite commonly cross and share similar methodologies and approaches, such as the design disciplines, areas such as creative writing, communications and cultural heritage have different methods to approach research and creative thinking and rarely work with the design disciplines. Despite, or possibly because of, a tight deadline coupled with cultural and linguistic challenges - the more obvious one between Australian and Chinese participants but also more subtle regional linguistic and cultural differences between the different regions in China - the workshop was an experiment that proved to be a highly effective means of generating new creative responses.

### **Overview:**

We have used the Honours China study tour workshops as a vehicle, not only to increase students' cultural intelligence, work in multi-disciplinary teams and enhance their work-ready skills but also to create a forum to find new and innovative solutions to world problems. During the tour, Australian students worked in teams with Chinese students to create quick creative solutions to complex problems. In the *48 Hours in Shanghai* workshop and exhibition, design thinking methods were used with cross-cultural participants as a means to find cross-cultural and cross-generation design solutions. Although focused on the ageing population in Shanghai, Australian and Chinese participants were able to identify similarities between cultural groups and established universal solutions that can be applied to a global audience.

As the majority of the participants fell in the 20 to 25 year old age bracket (a population often labeled as "digital natives") they had a strong connection, understanding and dependence on digital technologies in their daily lives. They had not previously thought widely, however, about how an elderly person might approach and utilize a technology such as a smart phone that is often confusing and 'foreign' to them. Because workshop participants themselves were forced to work in a situation that was out of their comfort zone, requiring them to communicate (often through visuals when language failed) in a second language, it further enhanced the ability of this group to create viable solutions. This situation prompted the realization that, for an elderly person, using a smart phone or tablet - with its own form of embedded meanings and 'visual language' - could be as difficult as trying to create a design solution with a group of people that you have never met before, from different disciplines, with a culture and language foreign to your own. Participants therefore approached the brief with heightened empathy and all of the projects dealt, in some form or other, with the concept of translating and adapting new technologies to better suit the aged population.

Although in its infancy (the Honours China tour was established in 2015), a preliminary survey has shown that the workshops have generated significant outcomes for our students. Open comments from UC Study Abroad exit surveys indicate that participants had an extremely positive experience on the tour that helped them to view their career options in a new way (2015 Feedback Report, 2015). As this tour is ongoing (we have received three years of New Colombo Plan funding 2016 - 2018) we are currently undertaking formal quantitative and qualitative surveys on the outcomes of this experience with an aim to create a more thorough and long ranging picture of the value of combining cross-cultural and multi-disciplinary experiences in an Honours program.

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