

OVERCOMING CONSTRAINTS, THROUGH CULTURAL EXCHANGE

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ABSTRACT:

Constraints in art and design practice are an inherent aspect of an individual's experience within the professional industries. The role of art and design education can place emphasis on the challenge of understanding how to value and work with constraints within the educational process. Therefore, this paper explores constraints as a positive and progressive aspect of the design process, and understands constraints as a necessary requisite of the student experience.

The paper will use a philosophical lens to view anxiety, challenges, constraints when course delivery and pedagogy in Hong Kong, is aligned to an international model from a non-Asian perspective. Tensions are experienced by all when an educational model of fashion education is underpinned internationally, yet it is explored here as fertile territory in relation to internationalisation and cross - cultural dialogue within fashion practice.

Keywords: Challenge, Cultural Dialogue, Exchange

1. INTRODUCTION

Within contemporary art and design education, students are challenging traditional teaching methods through the use of digital technologies to communicate insightful knowledge of their learning experience. Students use a diverse array of methods to reflect and evaluate teaching and learning. Course focus groups, reflective and evaluative reports are used to pass comment on their learning internally. While externally, students 'frame' their experience using online platforms - *Student Room*, Face book, Tumbler, Instagram, etc, - indicating the way in which social media offers uncensored eye opening accounts of how students feel about student life. Students are vocal about the constraints they face in spaces that operate to reflect real, and imagined identities and experiences.

While much of the feedback suggests successes and issues are experienced, personal development is often cited as an area that requires improvement. Students often go on strike, and would rather engage in passive learning where prescription offers an easy way forward. Historically, art students generally react against educational prescription and design education is the preferred option as it offers the autonomy that many undergraduates seek. Why, then do students tend to avoid talking openly about their work, when engaging with tutor and peer dialogue about their practice simulates the environment's they intend to penetrate upon graduation? The online student forums explicitly cite the anxiety and fear of presentations, peer critique, and assessment. Student written reflections also comment on the stress prior to public speaking at presentations. And the critique or 'crit' is often avoided despite its importance in gaining project feedback. 'The learner is in a sense 'trapped' and finds ways to escape without learning what he or she is intended to learn.' (Biggs 2007)

Qualitative analysis of the data available from student feedback can be used to shape, frame, and, curate the way in which struggle can be valued as an innovative and positive experience. 'reflecting on struggles opens a window of what is working and what is not...' (Amulya 2011) Moreover, constraints can be understood to be a positive part of the educational journey.

On line platforms offer a global landscape of opportunity for students to engage with. An artistic signature and voice can explore fertile new global territories. If students are learning and occupying new platforms through time-based media, convergence requires pedagogic attention. It is argued, '...if, in the potent metaphor from Bauman - we now move within a liquid world then perhaps we should consider that an act of liquid learning is upon us .' (Barnett 2012) In occupying multiple spaces in art and design education, teaching and learning can consider new ideas to engage students who as Barnett notes are handling and juggling many different and competing time frames of learning. The liquid learning can reflect the multiplicity of spaces as students traverse the world and experience learning physically and virtually. 'On the one hand students become involved and concerned with the sustainability of their own well-being. That well-being is increasingly interconnected with networks and learning spaces.' (Barnett 2012)

Therefore, this paper places its focus on how the educational reflective practitioner can use pedagogic practice to inform and assist students into taking risks. When faced with constraints in shaping their progression and position within contemporary time and space, students can build a skill set to assist in informing learning experiences with new possibilities.

2. MAPPING THE CONTEXT

International educational collaboration has provided an opportunity to compare and contrast how students face constraints within the student experience. The two art and design institutions discussed here are the Hong Kong Design Institute and the London College of Fashion. The collaboration takes a unique position in aligning a curriculum of fashion image practice from the vantage position and perspective of both the east and west. Teaching is shared between the institution's offering a global pedagogic collaborative experience for both academics and students.

Two final year groups undertook the same unit at the beginning of the academic year during 2012/13. Both groups were studying for a Bachelor of Art in Fashion Image. The subject specialism's included fashion photography, fashion styling, and fashion hair and make - up. All disciplines work toward the visual appropriation of artifacts that would signpost the viewer to a strong signature style through the process of collaboration for the professional industries. Both groups of students experience the same external examiner, ensuring the parity of academic and practical delivery, and student submissions are rigorously evaluated to respond to governmental and institutional guidelines within the respective higher education sectors.

During the course of the unit tutors from both institutions noticed the way in which students yearn for individual space and autonomy but found it difficult to discuss and present their work. So, what is it that the role of the pedagogic practitioner has to do to shape and frame the learning experience? To underpin the learning the teaching of the unit the pedagogic method of Constructive Alignment (Biggs and Tang 2007) was used to ensure that all elements of the unit and assessment requirements were aligned to the intended Learning Outcomes.

A key underpinning factor of constructive alignment (Biggs & Tang 2007) is that the student takes responsibility for their 'own' learning. The intention is to ensure students become cognitively aware of constructing meaning from what they actually learn within the various areas of their unit. Another important element of this method is the curriculum is a consistent system of learning so students understand that the tasks and activities directly relate to the outcomes required for assessment. For the method to be successful the learning environments and teaching methods build trust and confidence into the learning to ensure the student can face constraints and takes risks. 'Alignment is simply a matter of honesty and fairness that establishes the trust required for students to be confident of managing their own learning (Biggs and Tang 2007).' Taking the constructive alignment method into consideration when planning and developing an international collaborative curriculum to promote student engagement, the tutor student relationship can optimise the performance of the student as active participant. Accountability and responsibility abet the progression of the students in that by consciously taking charge of the learning, the student becomes empowered within the process. To face the constraints, fear and anxiety students express, a philosophical lens was utilised alongside the constructive alignment method for tutors to assist in framing the tasks and activities to build student confidence at both of the collaborating art and design institutions.

3. CASE STUDIES

3.1. CASE STUDY #1

To confront the sensitive aspect of personal struggle the briefing of the unit included the editorial message from *I Love You – The wrong issue-* (2011) a contemporary fashion platform informing its readers to align themselves to the following message,

'To live a creative life, we must lose our fear of being wrong.'

Used as an educational tool this potent quote prompted a curious response from students as the text suggests confidence can be hindered and undermined within the creative arena, the very spaces the young cultural intermediaries intend to occupy on completion of their studies. Students were asked to respond to the quote and it is notable that initially students were unsure of what to say or do and there was an awkward silence. The students were asked in groups to respond to the quote and engage in peer dialogue. What ensued was a discussion that students engaged in and many of the students verbally acknowledged they related directly to this succinct quote as it asserted making mistakes was a prerequisite toward pro-active creativity.

'Stories and dialogue can be effective technologies for the reflective process because they provide cognitively complex and culturally potent systems for conveying the way we think about, feel, and make connections in experience.' (Amulya, 2011)

A weekly discussion continued for seven weeks at the start of sessions where students reflected in small groups on what they felt they had, or had not achieved in response to the weekly goals they had set themselves. There was no embarrassment in what students perceived as areas of low achievement. Attendance and punctuality improved, but why are students so anxious? Personal reflections were positively commented upon by tutors and it was apparent students were facing the constraints within the learning process with more confidence. Students commented,

'I was disappointed when asked to talk to my mates, but after a while I realised I had never really spoken to them about how i felt about my work and life. I had known them for over two years. We work together, but we never really talked together.' HKDI student (Year 3)

'We had to answer the simple question, what is your work about? What is the concept about? I really struggled to answer this in week 1, we all did. It took so long. But I know what my work is about but was worried about what they would think.' LCF student (Year 3)

'The professor is very good and listens to my problems. I worked with the group each week to talk about my work and I give feedback to my friends. I talked and also did the peer tutorial paper. I have not looked at my work in this way and it was helpful. I liked learning about the methodology too.' HKDI Student (Year 3)

'I actually sat next to a student I had not spoken to for some time. We realised we have very similar tastes but disagreed on certain things. This did not cause a big problem. I suppose this is what it is when you work with people regularly' LCF Student (Year 3)

'I had no confidence and these sessions made me aware of how few risks I take. I need to do more practical work and get on with things' LCF student (Year 3)

In summary it is apparent to see dialogue is well received albeit initiated to prompt a response. Students were asked to consider themselves and their own position, rather than use a standard set of questions. Some of the answers capture a sense that students like being involved within collaborative dialogue and that it impacted positively on their learning. Having to evaluate peer feedback and reflective commentary's as a learning experience offered opportunity for students to understand and gain meaning of both their struggles and achievements, thus reiterating the underpinning objective of constructive alignment. Therefore, in light of student acknowledgment of their uncertainties, how can a philosophical understanding impact on design education to further assist the consistency of constructive alignment?

In *The Concept of Time*, (2004, 1962), the first draft of *Being and Time*, Heidegger informs the reader that *Besorgnis*, - anxiety, is a common thread within individuals affecting an individual's sense of being in wider reality. Therefore - *Eigenständig*, - self - discovery /autonomy - and discovery are operative words to be relocated from Heidegger within contemporary pedagogy more specifically to underpin the constructive alignment learning and teaching methods of design and fashion practice. If, as previously noted, students are switching off from important aspects of learning, it is important to understand that the student is in a process of negotiating their place in the world and that is a key aspect underpinning and affecting engagement with creative design practice.

According to Barnett (2012) The usual rite of passage of youth, can also affect the ability to fully engage with the design of a curriculum. Looked at from this perspective non engagement with presentations and the 'crit' can work against the facilitation and shaping of the requisite skills necessary for professional design employment. Barnett (2012), notes, the will to learn is embroiled within a complex system that prompts anxiety. A student engages with an art and design fashion education to make artefacts that offer a sense of their individual position and response to wider society. Picking up on this philosophical uncertainty, Scruton notes, acceptance '... is a permanent interest of rational beings, as they strive to achieve order in their surroundings and to be at home in their common world' (Scruton 2009). Students literally shop around and move through the complexity of dissolving boundaries and experience competing currents of turbulence.

' ... fashion is a guide to aesthetic choice which offers some kind of guarantee that others will endorse them (Scruton 2009).' Noting a trajectory whereby aesthetic acceptance or, 'fittingness,' and the importance to fit in co - exist within time and space.

By utilizing technology students can negotiate the myriad of spaces and take advantage of the way in which the pluralistic nature and fluidity of formats and platforms offer a selection of spaces for endorsement. When viewed through a philosophical lens, the students of design and fashion are positioned in a process whereby satisfaction and anxiety oscillate and it is the very practice and process the student is engaged within that fuels creative outcome, while at the same time can operate to undermine their ontological position. Scruton picks up on this contradiction, and notes,

'...fittingness is judged in terms of how things look, and in terms of the meaning contained in how they look'. The irony becomes more obvious and complex when those that mediate and visually appropriate and assist in regulating ... positive change, are the very people who are also struggling and living with their self made visual codes and conventions.' (Scruton 2009)

Therefore, through progressive use and engagement of the constructive alignment method, ownership of practice can assist in fostering creative outcomes through facing constraints of the self. Biggs and Tang (2009), note that assessment is the end of a process for academics, but is in fact the beginning of a new process for students. Likened to the fashion cycle, tutors need to propel themselves forward noting feedback is the beginning of a new educational process of learning.

3. 2. CASE STUDY #2

In order to facilitate a positive attempt to face constraints a micro evaluation of student evaluation took place. 30 students from each institution all completed the course unit evaluation sheet and it was interesting to see how students from each course and institution completed the form resulting in a different evaluation of the unit. Students complete the form independently within a collaborative setting and a representative collects the forms and evaluates the outcome prior to the form being evaluated by the tutor. The student is anonymous in this process in that no name of the student is required. An equal number of students were used from each course for the purpose of parity. Students are briefed in Week 1. Students submit assessed work in week 8. Feedback and the return of grades from the unit take place in week 10. Students evaluate the teaching and learning as follows by completing a unit evaluation during a feedback session at week 10. The resulting information is the summary of the group outcome from each institution.

Student Evaluation 2012/13: BA (Hons) Fashion Specialism

UNIT EVALUATION: Hong Kong Design Institute

What were the 3 best aspects of the unit? Post evaluation students noted the following:

1. Learning research skills
2. Tutorials
3. Lectures
4. Visual Analysis

How could the unit be improved?

Longer tutorials/more information of the fashion industry/ variety of tutors for varied comments on work/more fun/ postpone deadline/more interactive /time/ more tutorials/teach the specific content of the essay /simplify activities/more time/smaller groups/support/It is hard

Please indicate what you thought about the unit in the following categories?

	Unsatisfactory		very satisfactory		
Subject and content	1	2	3	4	5
Resources available	1	2	3	4	5
Learning and teaching strategies	1	2	3	4	5
Your participation in the unit	1	2	3	4	5

Please use this space to reflect on your contribution and participation in this unit:

The comments noted here are honest, although many sheets did not contain a comment

'I should be more participate in the class. eg , class work ' (1)

'I always have good progress after the tutorial' (1)

'can be more concentrate in the lecture. Because its difficult for me to read the ppt. By myself.(1)

In summary, after analysing the student response from Hong Kong Design Institute it is possible to see the struggles students experience with undertaking a course of study in English. Students cite the need for more time and support and two sheets noted students asked for the teaching delivery to be linked to individual themes asking for a leading direct voice of the tutor. This is particularly noted in the written element of the student studies the students face more challenges. The students note that they enjoyed the delivery which is

disseminated by academics from both institutions.

*What is notable is that the majority of students had evaluated the unit as neither, unsatisfactory, or very satisfactory. There were some students that identified areas very satisfactory and also Unsatisfactory. It is not possible to fully explain this response. Some students have noted that it is a polite response. It was also possible to notice that most students placed their participation in the unit slightly higher at 4.

Student Evaluation 2012/13: BA (Hons) Fashion Specialism

UNIT EVALUATION: London College of Fashion

What were the 3 best aspects of the unit? The students responded with the following points:

1. Tutorials
2. Guest speakers
3. Tasks and peer feedback in groups

How could the unit be improved?

More1-1/ extra time/it was ok / more study support for dyslexia/more time/

Please indicate what you thought about the unit in the following categories?

	Unsatisfactory		very satisfactory		
Subject and content	1	2	3	4	5
Resources available	1	2	3	4	5
Learning and teaching strategies	1	2	3	4	5
Your participation in the unit	1	2	3	4	5

Please use this space to reflect on your contribution and participation in this unit

'I worked really hard' (5) 'Terrible' (3)

'I missed some classes' (3) 'I need to work faster' (6)

In summary the outcome of the evaluation noted the students felt they needed more time to complete the unit and that they also require more one on one support. Two student evaluations noted students require more independent support to assist with dyslexia. The students had a varied set of comments in response to reflecting to their own contribution and participation to the unit. It is interesting to see that students either rated their participation in the unit as either unsatisfactory or very satisfactory using elements 3 & 5. The students acknowledged they need to be more proactive with engagement to the unit. The results were fed back to students retrospectively and students were keen to discuss they had the ability to recognise procrastination can be counterproductive to all aspects of the learning experience. Accountability of actions and responsibility of learning were regular comments in student discussion. Students are aware they avoid taking responsibility of their learning and note more work can be done to improve this aspect of the learning experience.

4. CONCLUSION

The international collaboration offers a vital space to consider and experience constraints in learning and teaching. Academics are constantly challenged in seeking a pedagogy that avoids diluting cultural nuances specific to institutional location. Hong Kong and London are both fertile spaces and students can and do capitalise on the platforms made available to

them. In the student world there are no fixed boundaries and structures are fragmented and fluid. While it is possible to argue some aspects of pedagogy and learning are lost in translation, through cross cultural dialogue and the exchange of active learning processes, those that are fortunate to be part of this collaborative experience gain a rich and valued experience that breaks through many of learning difficulties. Anxiety is confronted and constraints understood as a key aspect of learning that shape professional life.

Acknowledgement of tension and struggle through risk taking and the evaluation of mistakes is commended, and it is important to recognise the contradiction within fashion education and practice. Success is often driven by a constant negotiation of both risk, and confidence, and fashion like many other design disciplines thrives on this duality to sustain it. Situated in various platforms within culture, design and fashion image therefore, are powerful.

The micro study is small and qualitatively evaluated, rather than a quantitative approach. The aim intended to use a philosophical lens to understand how students face constraints in an age of complexity, and moreover, how the constructive alignment approach to teaching and learning can underpin art and design education. The evidence acknowledges students are mostly satisfied with their learning and appreciate the benefits of critique and dialogue. Student perception on their learning can be fed back into the curriculum to ensure a continuity of practice, rather than allowing complacency to set in. The role of the reflective practitioner is important here as it is the academic who is continually modifying course design and delivery, in constantly trying to work closer to the often unattainable perfect constructive alignment. For effective internationalisation of the curriculum at Hong design Institute, and at London College of Fashion collaborative academic peer dialogue will fundamentally work towards improving pedagogy in real, rather than imagined spaces, thus affording the student experience with a pedagogy of integrity and contemporary relevance.

Emergent outcomes became apparent when the simple text on risk taking was introduced. Yet, it was clear from students studying in both institutions that the collective request to engage in dialogue and to capture their transformative moments was a productive catalyst in prompting confidence in production. The 'official' crit's were well attended, but formalising active peer dialogue offered a greater sense of student personal self-esteem. As Oak (2009) has noted, '...during the process of design there are many occasions in which the artefact does not stand alone, but rather is interpreted, assessed, and debated through talk.'

Is clear through peer dialogue this anxiety about the self can impact upon educational progression. Students will continue to experience uncertainty about future possibilities, and more importantly, often about themselves. Therefore a positive shift of focus to the conscious awakening of the student journey within time and space experientially offers more positive possibilities for growth and confidence through personal development. Thus, pedagogy can be fully aware of the paradox loaded within the student challenge of simply 'being, myself. Facing constraints and the fear of risk taking the individual, through active cognition can become acutely aware of the self through pedagogy. By utilising the academic positions cited it is possible to articulate that through the process and experience of art and design education an individual can, appreciate the seminal transformative learning moments and can '...manifest... and be visible in itself (Heidegger 2011).'

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