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Louise McWhinnie is a Lecturer in Visual Communication at the University of Technology Sydney. Prior to lecturing in Australia, she worked as a graphic designer and lecturer in London. Her interest in the area of international design and design education developed during her employment with Central Saint Martins College of Art & Design, The London Institute. During this time she spent two and a half years as a seconded course director, establishing and developing a new graphic design course in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Louise is presently undertaking doctoral research into culture and the study of visual communication by international Asian students within the context of Australian universities.

## **Identity and Miscommunication: some experiences of international design students**

### **Abstract**

Bourdieu writes: *"The whole system of education as a particular historical structure finds expression in the communication which takes place between teachers and students. Misunderstanding and the fiction that there is no misunderstanding are inseparable phenomena."* (1994) This paper will report doctoral research with the working title 'A Naturalistic Inquiry into Culture & the Study of Visual Communication by Asian International students within the context of Australian Universities.' In a series of interviews with three students from one of the two universities in my sample, I explore how their experiences as students of visual communication reproduce, produce and re-produce new cultural subjectivities and identities. Utilising an explanatory framework 'after Bourdieu' I report on a sample of the various layers and contradictions of communication, miscommunication, understanding and misunderstandings, myths and fictions emerging from the analysis of the rich details of the interview data. These interviews from the study's second stage of data collection are supplemented by interviews with academic staff. The paper draws upon the results of the first stage of data collection, a questionnaire, broadly sampling first and second year students from both courses. This area of research draws upon the researcher's experiences as a design lecturer in Australia, Malaysia and the UK.

## Introduction

Bourdieu writes: *"The whole system of education as a particular historical structure finds expression in the communication which takes place between teachers and students. Misunderstanding and the fiction that there is no misunderstanding are inseparable phenomena."* (1994). Education, Bourdieu asserts, 'finds expression in' and needs to believe that what teachers and students say to each other is, or aspires to be, transparent. Teachers and students pursue clarity and corresponding meaning in day to day communication. Bourdieu attributes the very purpose and function of education, historically and structurally as by necessity communicative but also necessarily miscommunicative. Teaching is here an emancipatory activity; success is represented by the Habermasian epiphany "I see" of ideal communication rather than misunderstanding. Mastery is evidence of understanding rather than misunderstanding. Theories of subjectivity and identity refuting Cartesian dualism show individual participants in the intersubjective exchanges of educational sites to be multiple fragmented and often contradictory subjects.

In order to put this research into focus it is necessary to establish its context. This paper reports on ongoing research for a study entitled 'A Naturalistic Inquiry into the Study of Visual Communication by International Asian Students within the context of Australian Universities.' It relies on data gathered from a sample of respondents comprising academics and students culled from a questionnaire reported in 'Design Education and the Production of Culture' (AARE Conference, Sydney 2000).

## Participants

Nineteen UTS Asian international first and second year students were invited to participate in the interviews. Twelve volunteered and three were selected. The three student participants were chosen as each offered their own particular view of their own educational setting. Selection was based on willingness and availability to participate, their representation of a mix of different nationalities and gender; two were male, one female. Additionally there was a very clear selection decision based on the student's differing entry levels and course progression. As the stance of the researcher is that a number of issues of interest concerning transition and adjustment will occur during early years of student study (years one and two from a four year degree program), the participants have primarily been selected from these stages of the course.

The research acknowledges that the students selected for participation cannot represent all students and all issues and that universality and generality can't come from three students alone. As a naturalistic inquiry however, the research produced and the knowledge that comes from it will be case based.

The participants were:

Tom, who is in his early twenties and a male international student from Hong Kong.

Michael, who is in his early twenties and is a male international student from Indonesia.

Stella, who is in her late teens and is a female international student from Hong Kong.

Caroline, who is a casual lecturer within the Visual Communication program. She is a graduate of the program and is in her twenties.

Academics within the program were talked to on an informal basis, however only one was at this stage interviewed as part of the period of data collection. Caroline was chosen to

participate as an early career lecturer who has still fairly recent experience as a student within the program. It was thought that she would offer useful insights into lecturer and student interaction. Additionally her experience as a lecturer of a subject which encompasses a whole year of the program was perceived to give her the means to provide an overview of issues.

### **The Orthodoxy of Design Education**

The orthodoxy of design education with which we are comforted and cocooned, is that the very nature of the subject allows it flexibility, fluidity and freedom for staff and student exploration. Visual communication and graphic design are relatively new additions to the academy. Without a long tradition of scholarship design seeks definition preparadigmatically; it is by asserting difference from the traditional university that identity is formed. Design sits uncomfortably within the framework of a discipline if design values and rewards discourses of creativity and expression, the student's personal understanding, and experiential studio learning.

Visual Communication and Graphic design are principally seen as rhetorical and semiotic constructions and representations of culture, relying on the combination of word and image and culturally understood convention as the tools of communication. They are dependent for their message on a culturally agreed understanding of meaning and convention; conventions agreed and mutually understood between the designer and the audience or in the case of education between the student and lecturer. If the audience or the student are not in possession of the agreed design codes visual communication becomes miscommunication or meaning is absent and inchoate. Typically this 'missing the meaning' is attributed to a naïve theory of language and culture, where the insider who knows the codes will make meaning consistent with or similar to the maker. However codes could occur across one or many sociological vectors, including gender, class, sexual orientation, amongst others. Lecturers and students struggle to communicate what they see and how they see it. For all students design involves acquiring new strategies, a new semiotic, or a new visual language and developing a new means of communication. Bourdieu and Passeron say,

*Given what a system of education sets out to achieve, it is unquestionably pathological that*

*a teacher should expect his words to be understood precisely as he understands them and that the language of his students should merely echo his own. Such an expectation is inherently contradictory and dualistic.*

The literature on design education identifies 'design speak' or the jargon and terminology of design as presenting a new and uncertain language for the international student to negotiate, understand and implement. This is compounded if lecturers base teaching on the 'assumed knowledge' of the students. It is reassuring to believe that all of the students share your ability to 'see' what you see and understand the specialist nature of the language and concepts which Dewey describes as the "*right kind of telling the traditions of the calling.*" (Dewey, 1974, 151)

Students studying visual communication essentially rely upon the learning, use and combination of the written word and visual image as their means of communication. Lecturers regard this as a potential dilemma for the international student, who in addition to language and cultural adjustments, is asked to call upon themselves as the content of the subject in design pedagogy. Donald Schon citing Plato claims that this expectation when studying design places students in a compromising predicament.

*He is expected to plunge into designing, trying from the very outset to do what what he does not yet know how to do, in order to get the sort of experience that will help him learn what designing means. He cannot make an informed choice to make this plunge because he does not yet grasp its essential meanings, and his instructors cannot convey these to him until he has had the requisite experience. Thus he must jump in without knowing indeed, in order to discover what he needs to learn (Schon 1987)*

The difficulty for the lecturer is to ensure that the international students are gaining an understanding comparable with the local students. If, following on from the Schon, the students need to learn from 'jumping in', then the Asian international students are jumping from the high diving board as opposed to the local students who just need to jump in from the side.

### **Language and Culture**

The assumption arising from this orthodoxy of design education is that the international student as 'Other' embodies preexistent and exotic formations of 'homeland culture' as an accessible resource (indeed advantageous resource) to fund their design practice. The educational problem, it is assumed, occurs at the point of exchange, of communication, as a function of different languages. In other words, design educators see the problem as uniquely a technical one: international students have difficulties because they do not speak fluent English. As lecturers it is non-confrontational to form this view that the miscommunication is in fact mistranslation. Neatly packaging the miscommunication as a language issue allows us to escape the challenge by putting the onus back onto the students and thus escaping the challenge to our authority of accepted pedagogical practices. The lecturers see the international Asian students display social cultural behavior within the class setting so expect the same cultural difference to be displayed within the visual work. They can expect or hope that the student will give them something new that they haven't seen before and can appear to be disappointed when we don't get it, feeling that the student is hiding their "*true self*" (lecturer). They expect that the Asian students should produce the exotic or at the other extreme, designs that local students can and do produce.

The research and data being produced will utilise an explanatory framework 'after Bourdieu'. In this section of the paper I will reprise Bourdieu's project. His key concepts of culture, thought, language, power, individuals and institutions, the field, interaction between participants (within educational institutions in particular) and concepts of culture concerning action and "*how agents operate in their social milieu through the various levels of communication*" (p223 Creating Culture) are particularly apt for this research. At the heart of research and analysis of emerging data are his central concepts of "*the role of culture in the reproduction of social structures*" (Randal Johnson from The Field of Cultural Production)

His central concept of habitus he defines as

*The dynamic element of culture, the basis upon which we are disposed to order the symbolism available to us, through which the colours, shapes, sounds, words and so on become symbolic. So Bourdieu defines habitus as 'systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to act as structuring structures, that is, as principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representations. (Creating Culture, 217)*

The habitus according to Bourdieu produces 'individual and collective practices' in terms of culture. Of particular relevance to this study are his concepts of language; the language of ideas, linguistic exchange, linguistic misunderstanding and its perpetuation, the language of pedagogy and the language of the subject as a tool of mastery, academic power and legitimacy within the academy. Given the natures of the study's setting within the university study of visual communication, this will play a vital role in the research. For Bourdieu, language is as essential a part of habitus as beliefs. If 'what becomes symbolic' is a central concept of habitus, so the nature of the communication that occurs within the learning environment is the linguistic habitus. As Bourdieu says

*Linguistic utterances are forms of practice and are, as such, the result or consequence of a linguistic habitus and a linguistic market, where the market is understood as the ultimate field or, equivalently the field in which a practice receives its final determination*

(p120 Bourdieu. A Critical Reader)

### **The Data**

Caroline is a young woman, a recent graduand from UTS, teaches courses in studio and theory subjects and has a design practice in visual communication. Caroline was chosen as a respondent because as an early career lecturer with fairly recent student experience she offers useful insights into lecturer and student interaction. Additionally her experience as a lecturer of a subject, which encompasses a whole year of the program, was perceived to give her the means to provide an overview of issues. As a 'new academic' Caroline speaks without the formality of language that an established academic may employ for the expression of their ideas concerning international students.

Edited sections from the body of the transcript of the first interview with Caroline are included within the appendices of this paper. These are referred to within the body of this paper. This interview was conducted under research conditions and in compliance with ethics approval. The participant was given information on the nature of the research and consent and revocation information prior to signing an informed consent form. Transcripts of all interviews have been transcribed and tabulated using line counting and tape counter coding. This paper utilises the data gathered during a one and a half-hour taped interview. This was structured by a body of planned questions, but maintained a flexibility in response to emergent issues raised by the respondent. The data produced reveals codes and conventions in what is said, how it is said, what it means and what is the consequence. Of particular relevance here as a methodology of data analysis is Foucault's focus on interpreting the exposed form within the vocabulary and language of the participants through issues such as frequency and proximity.

This following section reports on the first interview with the academic and will be followed at a later stage with secondary interviews with the respondent, students and other academics employing triangulation as a means of establishing validity. In the production and analysis of data I anticipate using the interpretative tools of Foucault's theory of power and power relations and Habermas's theories of communication in addition to Bourdieu's concepts of culture, habitus, language and power across cultural fields. The research is in the early stages, so tools for the management of data are being constructed and methodological tools of analysis are still being developed through the concepts of Foucault and Bourdieu. These interpretative methods will allow the data to be tested, for research alone cannot make the meaning.

This first interview has proved to be encouraging in terms of establishing possible emergent fields. The subject of the interview defines 'culture' (162/1/3) as a broad cover term which appears to be positive and something that is seen as having legitimacy when referring to the design and production of students work, but negative when misunderstanding occurs between the participants. This consequently is attributed to 'culture' and labeled as linguistic misunderstanding, instead of acting as a challenge to the lecturer's role and pedagogical practices. By not receiving the anticipated response to her teaching, the lecturer fails to find transparency in the students' actions and transposes the consequent responses and perceived linguistic issues into cultural traits. The issue here is the lecturers in how she views and expresses what 'culture' is. It is a positive when it can be referenced for the production of a design, yet appears to be something removable when viewed as a hindrance to learning. Culture is perceived here as something that can be simply dispensed with or discarded. *"There's a big desire to shift their culture, to let it go... to reject it in a lot of ways" (230 /1/ 2-3) But if the student is still grappling with what their culture is and how it informs themselves and their practice, how does one discard what one cannot identify and what is the student being asked to replace it with? The lecturer's view here is that "There seem to be those that just want to be western" (256 /1/ 1) but as she herself is as an Australian still seeking her own identity*

*"Being Australian, you have that real sort of desire for culture. It's a search and so that's why I have a big preoccupation with identity." (230 /1/ 1-2)*

By applying the word 'being' to herself, as in *'Being Australian'* (230/1/1), she clearly places herself in a position of power and privilege. Using 'being,' she suggests that the students never have this state of 'being' despite the fact that it grants privilege and is humanising. This establishment of the lecturer's power as an Australian gives her an identity which is not given to the students. They are presented as less definite, whilst she grants herself an individuality that the students are not given, further establishing her as one of the majority. She imbues herself with nationality, whilst the students are merely attributed with 'culture'. Whilst she is established as an 'Australian' the students are seen to find necessity to *'shift their culture'* (230/1/3). Whilst she is establishes herself in a state of belonging, she perceives that the students feel it necessary with their culture to *'let it go'* and *'reject it'* (230/1/3). The word 'being' is used in all its strengths; 'being is acceptance and power' and establishes her as the benchmark against which others should measure themselves. This state of 'being' is based on an un-descriptive word with unclear meaning, but it is Caroline's choice of word and as such has meaning and is valid. As Paul Patton says, Nietzsche's use of 'Being'

*encompasses all varieties of modes of being. Similarly, the will to truth in Foucault's terms encompasses all forms of discourse which purport to represent reality in some way; that is, all those rich enough to allow for discrimination between 'true' and 'false utterances. (Paul Patton, Creating Culture, 228)*

The lecturer states that as *'Being Australian'* she has a *'desire for culture'* (230/1/1) whilst the students are perceived to be rejecting theirs. This contradicts her previous statement, for here she appears to view the students have a culture whilst she as an Australian is seeking one. This desire for culture in herself is transposed to the students in her encouragement that *"their cultural background is absolutely valid and you know it's their way of making sense of the world, which is a lot of what design is about as well" (284/1/1-3.)* The statement of cultural validity is a statement of approval and with it comes the assumption that by working with the system, the students aspire to become like the master. It is perceived that shedding their whole being can be done as readily as changing clothes. Culture here is also given the role of teacher, in that it will tell the students, if they listen to it, 'what design is

about' (284/1/2) as Bourdieu calls it, "initiation into mysteries" and "impersonal communication of a particular body of knowledge". (Academic Discourse, 107) This serves to continue to perpetuate the mystery that surrounds the pedagogy of design for the student for "initiation into mysteries" and "impersonal communication of a particular body of knowledge" are the two extremes of teaching. Students are assured that they have the key and that the use of it will bring about approval, but they do not know what the key is, where it is or what it is to unlock, yet they are reassured that 'culture' will do this for them. They appear to the lecturer to be rejecting their culture, yet at the same time are being encouraged by her of its validity. Their 'culture' appears to require encouragement, approval and validity from the lecturer. This however is not affirmation of their culture, but approval of what the lecturer views as the useful commodities for the subject; certainly "calligraphy" but not "cyber type"(354/2/ 3)

The lecturer as an early career academic has novitiate status in what it means to teach design. She states that *'When I give lectures, I don't try and give lectures on things I don't understand'* (284/1/5). The expectation is however that the students will attend lectures on subjects using language or concepts that are unclear or unfamiliar to them. This allows the lecturer to retain the power of knowledge for by exposing herself to uncertainty her perceived security would be challenged; the security which establishes her power and that separates her from the students. As Bourdieu says of the academic "in short he must be a teacher as well as an initiator", yet by maintaining the perpetuation of 'what she knows' the lecturer maintains the distance that she perceives 'culture' and difference have created;

*"It's up to them to bring that to me and for me to encourage that in them"* (284/1/6-7).

In terms of interaction, attributed by the lecturer to both issues of language and cultural traits she reports *"You ask if there's a question"..." but they won't say."*(162/1/4-5) The lack of questions is a measure of competency yet is viewed as incompetence. By not asking questions this should suggest that the international students understand, yet to the lecturer this is a sign of cultural deficiency. The assumption is made that clarification needs to be sought for full comprehension. The lack of this does not lead the lecturer to feel secure that the information has been comprehended, but in fact leads her to attribute the lack of response to non-comprehension. Caroline, although until recently a student herself, has consciously moved away from her previous position as a learner. She is establishing herself in her new role as an apprentice lecturer, yet by conferring 'Other' status to the students as 'They' she is clearly establishing herself in the position of master.

### Conclusion

So, in conclusion, the 'miscommunication' presented in this paper is that the participants perceive that there is no miscommunication. As active participants in the pedagogical environment they don't know what they are looking for, but know when they don't get it. They seek evidence of culture but have little knowledge of what 'it' is. As the researcher I have brought my own preconceptions to the study. Although as a naturalistic inquiry these are not to be negated, I realised that my own pre-conceptions of the situation needed to be addressed. I started this research thinking that I could find the truth about the reality for International Asian students in their study of visual communication in Australia and fell into the trap of exactly what I accuse others. By thinking that issues could be seen to be stereotypical, I also was viewing, if not the international Asian students as a "homogenous group of people with similar background and educational experiences" (Burns, 1990, Volet & Kee, 1993), then certainly their issues as being able to be generalised. Initially I expected that the data collection would produce a distinct set of characteristics that would distinguish the international from the Australian student and that this 'distinction', once identified, would

readily imply that a form of resolution could be recommended or indeed be implemented through consideration of the design and application of appropriate design pedagogy.

The simplicity of this task was challenged however, as two problems emerged. Firstly, the research relied on data gathered from a sample of respondents comprising academics and students culled from the original questionnaire. The resulting interviews revealed the problems; academics, I discovered, will extemporise with ease and at length, students however, find it difficult to respond. The interviews revealed a limitation in my intended methodology, as conversations and interviews with the international students proved difficult. Given their modest English skills, little useful data was provided.

What has been presented is the result of early methods of data collection and clearly other investigative methods will need to be developed to provide student data. As an ongoing body of doctoral research, these issues will be addressed and refined through the design of the form of the naturalistic inquiry and the interpretive methodologies employed by the researcher.

The data highlights emergent issues of a culture of abundance as well as a culture of deficiency.

The culture of abundance is the imagined and invented educationally rich well that the students and lecturers can tap as a resource for creative design outcomes. The culture of deficiency however is how both students and lecturers attempt to tap this well, and the perceived 'cultural' hindrances that affect this. The extracted data suggests that self, identity and subjectivity of both lecturer and students are issues that will be further investigated through subsequent interviews. The lecturer as well as the students are as Bourdieu says,

*a constant improviser in an ambiguous and partially understood environment:  
'It is because the subjects do not, strictly speaking, know what they are doing  
that what they do has more meaning than they know.*

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## Appendices

Extracts edited from: Interview 003, Tape 4

Side 1: 000 – 530, Side 2: 000 – 502

Coding: Tape counter/side/line

### Caroline (Casual Lecturer)

162 / 1 / --

*1. Well I mean first of all language is obviously a big issue – so that's spoken, written, their reading and 2. how they understand just someone speaking to them. So that's the first hurdle which of course must be 3. overwhelming. But then again it seems that there are cultural issues to do with the way they*

*4. learn. They don't tend to speak up much. You ask if there's a question and even though they may not 5. have understood a single word you've said, regardless of language at that point, maybe they just 6. understand the concepts I'm talking about, but they won't say*

230 / 1 / --

*1. Being Australian, you have that real sort of desire for culture. It's a search and so that's why I have a big 2. preoccupation with identity. Whereas it seems with these international students, there's a big desire to 3. shift their culture, to let it go... to reject it in a lot of ways.*

236 / 1 / --

*1. I just said to one student, "Wow you're from Taiwan, I don't know anything about Taiwan, what can you 2. tell me about it?" and she just looked me straight in the eye and she said, "You can shop till midnight." 3. And I just thought wow, you've got your whole country there and that's what you want to tell me, and I 4. wasn't sure if she thought that was going to impress me because I was western or what the idea was 5. there. But a lot of them seem to be like this.*

256 / 1 / --

*1. There seem to be those that just want to be western, there are those who are actively rejecting their 2. culture and there are those who are very happily staying with their culture and they actually refer to it 3. and use it for their work. So you see them using calligraphy and you see them drawing on it*

284 / 1 / --

*1. I've been more actively trying to foster that idea, that their cultural background is absolutely valid and you 2. know it's their way of making sense of their world, which is a lot what design is about as well. Sometimes 3. I can't tell if it's a cultural thing, like they don't want me to see it or they think I don't want to know, I don't 4. want to see that, because I mean with all due respect, it's not my cultural background. When I give 5. lectures, I don't try and give lectures on things I don't understand. I'm not going to try and give a lecture 6. on the symbolic quality of numbers in Indonesia. It's up to them to bring that to me and for me to 7. encourage that in them. But then the other thing is I guess is they've made an active*

*decision to come to 8. Australia to study, and that's when you get this almost hyper western design, it's quite bizarre where they 9. make all these strange efforts to make, I don't know, imagery that's sort of 'not quite'...*

**354 | 2 | --**

*1. If they really are rejecting their culture – to me that's interesting in itself and to visual communication 2. lecturers. It's quite ironic, we're in communication and we have poor communication in the classroom 3. setting... they sit there going 'No, no, I don't want to use calligraphy, I want to use cyber type.' Why don't 4. they talk about why? I'd love to know more about what motivates that, like what is the hang up, because 5. we in the west all go off to yoga and do Zen and are into feng shui in our rooms. So we're going that 6. way, and you know I just think that is an interesting thing. Maybe visual communication should facilitate 7. that expression and that understanding.*