Visualising and Challenging Barriers to Domestic-International Student Integration and Interaction

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SUMMARY
This project sought to draw out issues around intercultural relations in peer-learning, particularly in the teaching environment of the architectural studio. The 'Elephant in the Room,' refers to issues which are felt to be present in group teaching situations, but for which we are either not comfortable openly discussing or have no language to do so. Working with a cohort of Masters of Urban Design students (mainly from East Asia) we sought to find ways to ‘name elephants’ and allow students to make their own visual prompts in order to help other students discuss what can be difficult topics more openly.

WHAT ISSUE WERE YOU TRYING TO ADDRESS AND WHY?
Peer learning, group work, discussions and collaborative ways of working are key methods in architectural education. Yet certain barriers, both linguistic and cultural, were reported as preventing engagement between different cohorts of students within and across the various postgraduate courses. The project primarily emerged from our concerns that pedagogical approaches rely on cultural understandings or assumptions, which are not always articulated. So whilst an awareness of cultural barriers does exist, they are often unspoken, leaving problems unaddressed and preconceptions unchallenged.

* Lice on the Bald Head is a similar idiom to Elephant in the Room in some parts of China.
**APPROACH**

Our approach has combined both discursive and visual methods. Firstly, we began with two informal sessions (a working lunch and teatime discussion) with MA Urban Design Students. Both sessions aimed to encourage students to reflect on their own experiences, with our role simultaneously as both participants as well as facilitators in the dialogue. We drew out (literally) and wrote our experiences on a large paper tablecloth to allow a collaborative form of record-making across both sessions.

During the second session, we invited students to make their own, visual representations of the issues for distribution amongst other students for discussion. They would also be used as a means to pass on the more implicit learning from their experiences on the Masters course. With the knowledge that intercultural relations are often difficult to talk about (hence they can become ‘elephants’ or ‘lice’) we challenged students to explore non-verbal forms of communicating our conversation. They subsequently designed and produced a series of visualisations of their ‘elephants’ and a written commentary.

The final part of the project is our own interpretation and representation in which we name the ‘elephants/lice’ that we and our students have encountered. Through the creation of this mini-booklet or ‘field guide,’ we had two aims. Firstly, we wanted to help ourselves and others in identifying and addressing barriers to domestic-international student interaction and peer learning. Secondly, we wanted to open up (rather than conclude) further discussions around questions of internationalisation. The final stage of the project will therefore be to display this work, along with the students’ representations, and to open up discussions in the school amongst staff.

**BENEFITS**

From a Learning and Teaching perspective, this project has helped the staff members involved to gain a valuable insight into some of the cultural barriers that limit domestic-international student interaction and peer learning from taking place in the design studio. For the students involved in the discussion session, there was opportunity to reflect on their learning experiences together and to recognise the implicit knowledge they had constructed around activities such as group working. It also allowed all students to understand and value the skills in intercultural learning that they had gained during the last year.

The unconventional project name drew the attention of other staff members as well as students and became a focal point for informal discussions about international-domestic peer learning. Small opportunities to discuss issues arose in corridors, kitchens, on the tram,
and so on. This proved to be an unintended but welcome effect of the project and the importance of language and metaphor in enabling discussions.

What the project has also hinted at is that many of the barriers, whilst perceived as home/international student issues actually affect a number of people and are not confined to one particular group or individual. For example, a student not understanding something but feeling that they should, and therefore staying silent, could affect both home and international students. Following on this finding, we may wish to consider developing/designing pedagogical approaches which help students to take more active roles and to help develop awareness within the group.

From an interaction perspective, the discussion sessions helped bring to light a series of barriers to interaction, not only between students, but also difficulties caused by facilities, room temperatures, food smells, as well as expected languages or appropriate behaviours in the studio space. By naming or drawing attention to these areas, we hope to break down some of the barriers.

The booklet produced by students will also be a good starting point for discussions with other students about how they might be feeling about difficulties integrating into the school. It also recognises the creative, everyday ways that students tackle the challenges and barriers they perceive.

**LESSONS LEARNED**

There have been a number of lessons learned that are both pragmatic as well as conceptual in approach. Pragmatic lessons include the realisation that students need more support and time to work around this topic and that very close attention needs to be paid to participation and group dynamics. More significantly, however, in the students’ booklet there is an overriding sense that it is international students (rather than home students or staff) that need to learn new skills. On the one hand, this can be seen as positive. Those participating are proactive about their learning and sought to use this opportunity to help others. However, one of the bigger lessons of the project has been a certain difficulty around approaches to criticism in the context of both student-tutors relations and cultural background.

As staff we specifically sought a critique from students regarding our pedagogical approaches or performance, as well as a critique for other (home) students. However, the established hierarchy of student-tutor, as well as the difficulties of critiquing your ‘host’ proved quite difficult to overcome. This limited the discussion and outcomes of the project.
and points to further work required. Not only on the question and nature of critique as a cultural practice, but moreover a seeming lack of awareness (on both sides) that internationalisation is also about the skill set of domestic students and staff.

As new members of staff, we were perhaps naïve about the level of discussion we could facilitate around such a sensitive subject. The conversations brought up fears, for example, around who the course was for, or should be, designed for; who were the ‘desired’ students; what different levels of skills were being taught and so on. It also raised questions as to why exclusion might take place, which is not an easy conversation. This experience has emphasised for us that cultural agility is something that needs to be learnt, and should be a desire for all staff and students.