BUILDING A DESIGN CULTURE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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ABSTRACT
Students entering the design foundations program at the American University of Sharjah (AUS) in the United Arab Emirates often find themselves in an educational environment very different than what they have experienced and quite different than what they expected. The school provides a co-educational, multicultural environment that is much different than most other universities in the Middle East and very different than what they have experienced in their secondary education. In addition to this, design education introduces students to a very different way of thinking and working. While all of these students have been exposed to some degree of Western culture, there are fundamental cultural differences that affect the way these students engage their design education. Challenges come from a student's prior experience with a model of education that stresses memorization and recall rather than critical thinking skills. In design education, the importance placed on questioning preconceived ideas has the ability to go beyond these students' immediate concerns.

One primary aspect common to both the educational system in the Middle East and Eastern cultures is the emphasis on community. This has both positive and negative outcomes in design education. Independent thought is often discouraged and conformity is praised. Students enter the university with little experience thinking for themselves. Social and family obligations are a priority and often conflict with study and work time. This paper will examine how a "design community" allows for an educational support system to confront these issues.

The challenges of building a global design culture in the Middle East hinge not only on confronting educational methods but also on making connections with international practices in design. Without a rich physical environment in which to draw from, the Internet has become the preferred means of design research and communication. This paper will focus on how the Internet has been inserted into the context of design education as a means of broadening students' educational experience and as a means to reinforce "design community."

1   BACKGROUND

The United Arab Emirates is different than most countries in the Middle East in that roughly 80 percent of its population of four million is composed of expatriates [1]. This expatriate population is made up of people from all over the world who have moved to the Emirates to work in various industries. Most countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) rely on expatriate labor to sustain economic development but the UAE is perhaps the most culturally diverse country of the region. Students in the foundations program at the American University of Sharjah (AUS), a private university located in the UAE emirate of Sharjah, come from 22 different countries. The largest single population, that of Iranian nationals, makes up only 18 percent of the total student population in the foundations program. The second largest population, that of UAE nationals, makes up another 15 percent. GCC nationals make up 25 percent of the total foundations student population and 66 percent are of Arab decent. The rest are from Asia, Africa, Europe and North America. The one-year foundations program at AUS includes students who will major in architecture, interior design, visual communication, multimedia design and design management.

One primary aspect common to both the educational system in the Middle East and Eastern cultures is the emphasis on community. This has both positive and negative outcomes in Western design education. Independent thought is often discouraged and conformity is praised. The United Nations Development Program's (UNDP) *Arab Human Development Report 2003* stated that some researchers have argued that the curricula taught in Arab countries seem to encourage submission, obedience, subordination and compliance, rather than free critical thinking. In many cases, the contents of these curricula do not stimulate students to criticize political or social axioms. Instead, they smother their independent tendencies and creativity [2].

Many students entering AUS have little experience thinking for themselves. They are accustomed to parents making decisions for them and teachers directing them as to what to do. Research conducted through the Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research notes, "Education in the GCC countries is criticized for its emphasis on routine learning and memorization, for its high attrition and for repeaters' rates which have reached 31 percent in some secondary schools. Schools are accused of graduating more and more low achievers who are functionally illiterate and lack a minimum threshold of competence." [3] The methods of instruction students are exposed to also limit the types of learning experiences many of the students have. The UNDP report notes that "there are various means for conveying information: lectures, seminars, workshops, collaborative work, laboratory work and many others. In Arab countries, however, lectures seem to dominate. Students can do little but memorize, recite and perfect rote learning. The most widely used instruments are schoolbooks, notes, sheets or summaries. Communication in education is didactic, supported by set books containing indisputable texts in which knowledge is objectified so as to hold incontestable facts, and by an examination process that only tests memorization and factual recall." [4] At the end of their first semester of study at AUS, only 20 percent of the foundations students surveyed stated that their secondary education prepared them for the type of learning needed in their foundations courses.

There have been significant efforts in the last two decades to increase the quality of education in the region. Private universities like the American University of Sharjah have been established to provide an education equivalent to what one would typically find in the West. Because of the growing globalization of the economy, English has been the preferred language of instruction, which has posed a problem for many students who lack the English language skills needed to effectively engage in a teaching environment that often involves complex issues and theories. Many students must spend extra time devoted to reading to reach a level of comprehension adequate to pass the course.

Social and family obligations are a priority in regional cultures of the Middle East and often compete with study and work time. Almost half of all foundations students at AUS say that family obligations conflict with study and studio work time. Far too often, the family structure has created an environment that also limits students' abilities to think for themselves. The UNDP report states, "Studies indicate that the most common style of child rearing within the Arab family is the authoritarian accompanied by the over-protective. This adversely affects children's independence, self-confidence and social efficiency, and leads to an increase in passive attitudes and the deterioration of decision-making skills, not only with respect to behavior, but also to how the child thinks. For, starting in early childhood, the child becomes accustomed to suppressing her or his inquisitive and exploratory tendencies and sense of initiative." [5] Social time spent visiting and talking to friends is even more of an issue for foundation students at AUS, with as many as 70 percent saying that social time with friends conflicts with study and studio time.

The factual information on student habits is based on a survey given to design foundations students at the end of their first semester of study at AUS. This survey has been given for the last two years for the purpose of tracking demographics and trends in our student body.

2   HIERARCHY

One of the most important issues that design students must confront early in their education is hierarchy. Communicating ideas through visual representation as well as analyzing existing design precedent require an ability to find the primary elements or the most important aspects of the design. Students who are used to rote learning and memorization have an inability to do this well because everything is seen as being important. When students are asked to read a text and highlight the key issues or ideas, the text is often returned with a majority of the page highlighted.

Related to our students' inexperience with thinking hierarchically is their inexperience with thinking abstractly. To some degree, this inability affects most students entering the design professions but in this region it seems to be more pronounced. Because knowledge is often objectified, information is taken at face value. There is little experience at questioning, analyzing and criticizing points of view.

To combat these tendencies, beginning students at AUS are given types of projects that allow for multiple interpretations and solutions. It is also important not to give projects in which the solution or end product is obvious from the beginning. For instance, it would not be advisable to ask students to design a chair because they already know

what a chair looks like and would have difficulty questioning and analyzing their design proposals. Because of our students' previous educational experiences, they seem to be much more product-oriented than process-oriented in the way they approach design solutions. Product-oriented design solutions are much more susceptible to pre-conceived ideas. Because our students are not accustomed to questioning and analyzing the content of the solution, these pre-conceived design solutions tend to also be very superficial, literal and generic.

A process-focused design studio facilitates the introduction of abstraction and hierarchy through a methodical approach. Instead of a product-focused outcome, the act of exploring and searching becomes the focus of the studio. In a process-focused studio, the solution to the design problem is the outcome of a set of activities aimed at exploring characteristics, relationships and connections derived from the elements of the design problem. With this method students take a problem and break it down into different parts. The approach is to first analyze and question the issues of the project and present the various issues through a series of diagrams that abstract and represent the conditions of the project. The analysis is then quantified through the establishment of a hierarchy of issues and concerns that is of interest to the student. The direction that the project takes becomes the domain of the individual student. Design decisions come from an engagement in the process and not from external preconceived influences. As common as this might seem in a Western design education, it is quite new and unique to many of the students at AUS.

3   COMMUNITY

One positive aspect that students from AUS bring with them from their previous education is a strong sense of community. Students from the Middle East are used to working in groups and actively seek out each other for support. Because students spend a great deal of their time in each other's company working in the studio, they are encouraged to engage each other as part of the learning process. Students also seem to understand the value of working and studying with a diversity of other people. This type of engagement seems to be as relevant to the profession as it is to education. In describing the studio culture that was established at Umbra Ltd. in Toronto, Paul Rowan states, "Sustaining creativity requires a continuous infusion—not only of new ideas, but also new people." [6] The establishment of a design culture is a good way to connect academic and social experiences. If this happens in a studio space that is utilized by a diversity of people, learning through an unscripted engagement with others naturally follows. The value that is placed on social relations is also integrated into how design is taught. Small-scale critiques and collaborations allow students to "help each other." This plays into the strong sense of community prevalent among the cultures represented on the AUS campus. Rowan observes, "It is our consistent experience that creative work thrives best in a collaborative environment." [7] Communication is also encouraged between year levels as an informal mentoring system. Ninety-four percent of foundations students at AUS reported that they discussed their work with other foundations students, 63 percent reported doing so on a consistent basis, and 60 percent stated that they discuss their projects with upper-year level students. This collaborative atmosphere is also facilitated by the openness of the classrooms and the proximity of different majors to the foundations area. This physical arrangement encourages collaboration and interaction not only among students, but also among faculty.

Unfortunately, this strong sense of community has, at times, come into conflict with the way in which design education is taught. One of the most fundamental aspects of Western design education is the encouragement of individual thinking. As students become more independent and self reliant, they also tend to become more competitive. While some competition can help motivate students to engage their designs, too often it gets in the way of a healthy learning environment.

The line between "helping" and what might constitute cheating is also blurred in a strong design community. Stronger students at AUS have been known to help weaker students in their assignments and projects, sometimes going as far as doing part or all of the project or drawing for them. The stronger students' motivation for "helping" the weaker students is based on the role they play within the design community. They feel a social obligation to make sure none of their classmates/friends fail. The line that defines what is acceptable and not acceptable has to be continually reinforced. The motivation to cheat goes back to the product-oriented focus of the students. Cheating becomes a means to an end. The grade is seen as ultimately the most important measure of their education. As with the grade, the degree is likely to be seen as a product to be acquired. In order to overcome this product focus, the process and the journey of education must be reinforced as the ultimate goal.

4 COMMUNICATION

The Internet has changed the way design students become aware of the larger world of design. At AUS the Internet plays a major role in research and communication. The major problem with information and design resources from the Internet is that they are often unreliable, without focus and of varying quality. Also, like design publications, the images found on many websites reinforce the product-focused nature of the design and do not provide much written context.

Most design classes at AUS have a web-based component that contains class documents, assignments and resources. It is also the method in which students can check their grades on individual projects and see how they scored in relation to the rest of the class. As a research tool it allows faculty to provide particular links to websites that are relevant to the design project. This allows faculty to help guide the student's time and focus to particular websites of high-quality images and information. What may be missing from a particular website can be linked to a scanned article or other source of information that contextualizes the design project that is being examined. Without this focus, Internet research becomes a free-for-all that usually lacks rigor and merit.

As a communication tool, the Internet has reinforced the idea of "design community" by providing a venue for questioning and informal exchange outside of regular class times from either studio or home. Many of our students have family obligations that keep them from school and studio in the evening and on weekends when some of the most productive design work is accomplished. Information technology helps to mediate the isolation that these students feel from the traditional studio culture. Images of student projects can be easily photographed or scanned and sent to other members of the studio or to their design professor who can comment and give criticism.

5   CONCLUSION

Faculty have an enormous responsibility in establishing a healthy global design culture. No matter what the particular context, there are major issues the design community shares. The importance of reinforcing critical thinking skills, nurturing independent thinking and exposing students to the diversity of ideas and design issues examined throughout the world is central to the education of a designer. It is one of the first steps to ensure consistent academic quality, innovation and achievement. The UNDP report states, "Ultimately, the quality of education does not depend on the availability of resources or on quantitative factors, but on characteristics related to the organization of the educational process and the means of delivery and evaluation." [8]

Negotiating the connection between the local condition and global trends, and between established cultural norms and new ideas, will be the responsibility of every designer. In order for students to take this responsibility, they must be equipped to deal with ever-changing issues and influences. Within a multicultural environment, the design culture has a unique ability to absorb cultural, social, political and religious differences in a way that promotes quality, innovation and respect for other points of view. The establishment of a positive collaborative atmosphere has the means to produce an environment that combines educational objectives, social opportunities and growth. If it is to be successful, students must be drawn to the design studio because it provides a type of learning that they are unable to achieve in isolation. When students learn a process in which they question, analyze and explore seemingly small insignificant issues in design, they then become equipped to confront larger, more complex issues of life and culture.

REFERENCES

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[2]   United Nations Development Program (UNDP), *Arab Human Development Report 2003: Building a Knowledge Society*. United Nations Publications, 2003, p. 53.

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[4]   UNDP, p. 54.

[5]   Ibid, p. 51.

[6]   Rowan P., Creativity and education: Personal reflections on achieving success by working outside the box. *Education Canada*, Vol. 43, Issue 4, 2003.

[7]   Ibid.

[8]   UNDP, p. 55.