APPLYING INTERVENTIONS TO ENHANCE KNOWLEDGE OF MALAYSIAN CULTURAL ART FORMS

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Abstract

In graphic design education, students are trained for the industry through practising and applying graphic design principles in various classroom and real life projects. While possessing the knowledge of these principles is important, the researcher, through her experience as a graphic design educator in Malaysia, finds that Malaysian students also need to have some knowledge and understanding of their own local, cultural art forms. This is because it could open more doorways for a designer to produce creative ideas that would be more relevant to the local audience. Therefore, in order to enhance her students' knowledge and understanding of some Malaysian cultural art forms, the researcher used a case study action research method and applied interventions in her classroom of 20 graphic design students, underpinned by Cultural Responsive Teaching pedagogy. Various

activities were carried out to scaffold students' learning of the selected Malaysian cultural art forms. The activities were, a visit to a contemporary Malaysian art exhibition; participation in a batik workshop; a visit and hands-on experience making some craft work at a Mah Meri cultural village, and attending a talk about wayangkulit, as well as viewing some wayangkulit exhibits. Upon the completion of all activities, the students produced a work of design based on a local social/environmental/health issue of their choice. The researcher sought to find out if the students applied their knowledge of Malaysian cultural art forms into their work of design. Findings from studying the students' design work show that not all of them applied the knowledge that they had gained from the activities. However, through focus group interviews, most students express that their knowledge has been enriched by participating in those activities.

Keywords

Graphic Design Education, Intervention Activities, Cultural Art Forms, Teaching and Learning

1. Introduction

In multicultural Malaysia, cultural elements are abundant, amidst globalisation. This is evident through ornate and colourful religious buildings such as Hindu and Buddhist temples that exist in between high rise commercial buildings in the middle of the city, pristine and minimally hued churches and mosques against a lively, picturesque scene of a housing area or a market; locals dressed in their traditional costumes not only on festive seasons but also as everyday wear for some. Malaysian cultural art forms (MCAF) such as wicker, beadwork, wood carving are just a few examples of the uniqueness of this country that has a diverse mix of traditional cultures while sharing a globalised one.

For graphic design students whose inspiration for ideas come from their visual surroundings, this country's cultural art forms are indeed ideal for them (Kim, 2004; Badrul Isa, 2006; Scherer, 2010; Berry & Candis, 2013; Munday et al., 2014; Philip, 2018). Graphic design, a visual form of communication, utilises text and images to convey messages to an audience (Meggs, 1998; Santoro, 2014). The school that pioneered graphic design education was the Bauhaus, which began in 1919 (Lupton & Miller, 1993; Fiedler & Feierabend, 1999; Whitford, 2003, Siebenbrodt & Schöbe, 2012). Its curriculum has been emulated by design schools in many countries even today.

Studies have shown that the role culture plays not only in art and design education but also in education itself. Kim (2004) studied how creativity is influenced by an aspect of culture,

Confucianism, through the case study of Korean's gifted education. In art and design education, cultural identity is one of the important ingredients to produce confident, self-respect designers who are observant and also respectful of the society they work in (Marshall, 2007; Meyer, 2008). In a multicultural country like Malaysia, education provides that avenue for students to be more aware and attuned to the various cultures (Badrul Isa, 2006). Education, including graphic design education, therefore acts as an important hub to inculcate the knowledge and understanding of culture to students (Stultz, 2006; Marshall, 2007; Khoury & Khoury, 2009; Berry & Candis, 2013; Munday et al., 2014; Hadjiyanni, 2014).

The above mentioned studies focus on the importance of art and design education in creating awareness of culture in students through classroom activities that are related to culture. While the knowledge in design principles is pertinent in guiding students to produce effective design work, the researcher noticed that, through her experience, there is a lack of local cultural contents. In that regard, the problem that is identified for this research is that Malaysian graphic design education in the private sector does not put much attention to students' knowledge and understanding of culture.

As such, graphic design education plays a role in guiding students to learn from the cultural art forms in their surroundings. Interventions, in the context of culture-based education in art and graphic design courses, which had been previously practised and researched on, facilitate and enrich graphic design students' learning (Khoury & Khoury, 2009; Lai, 2012). Therefore, in this research, interventions involving four selected MCAF were incorporated into a graphic design class. Malaysian batik, Mah Meri woodcarving, wayangkulit and contemporary Malaysian art were the selected MCAF for this study due to their individuality and original historical paths. Each originated from various cultures and what they are today is the result of the assimilation of cultures in Malaysia. These selected MCAF consisted of a combination of traditional and contemporary art and design forms as the Malaysian culture is a mix of traditional and modern cultures (Hooker, 2003). These MCAF were also selected due to the uniqueness in their visual and contextual qualities. Since graphic design students primarily work with visuals and materials (Armstrong, 2009; NCERT, 2011; Wagner & Watch, 2017), batik's form of printmaking, wayangkulit puppets' forms and shapes, contemporary Malaysian art's variety of styles and Mah Meri's traditional use of natural materials such as wood and leaves would serve as a suitable start for the students' acquisition of knowledge and understanding of MCAF.

In line with the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2015-2025 (Higher Education), where one of its aspirations is for Malaysian students to reflect the mix of Malaysian ethnicities, recognising unity in diversity, this study focused on enhancing graphic design students' knowledge of local cultural art forms. Culturally responsive teaching (CRT) refers to a pedagogy that embraces and integrates students' cultural heritage into the curriculum (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Gay, 2002; Howard, 2012; Lee, 2012). CRT posits that the main emphasis on students' learning is culture. CRT underpins this research in that it engages and facilitates students' holistic learning and acquiring cultural knowledge and understanding through MCAF.

2. Methodology

An action research was engaged in this study. The case was a course, in which the researcher teaches in the graphic design programme of a local private university. The selected class is a typical graphic design class in the local private university and the main single unit of analysis. The class consisted of 20 students, with the majority of them being Malaysians. The group was selected due to the natural setting, which was the researcher's classroom. The group was in their first semester, the first year of their study in a graphic design programme. The duration of the research was one academic semester. The research set out to first find out the selected group's initial knowledge of four selected MCAF; the types of intervention activities incorporating the four selected MCAF in a graphic design classroom; and the students' application and knowledge of those MCAF in their design work after participating in the intervention activities. This study contained three cycles of data collection, data analysis, data interpretation and reflection.

At Cycle 1, focus group interview and questionnaire was conducted. Based on the emerging data, Cycle 2 was planned and executed. At Cycle 2, intervention activities for each MCAF were planned and implemented.The4 intervention activities spanned 8 weeks. Although each was a one-day activity, the students were given a week to fill out a questionnaire after having participated in each activity. This was to give them time to contemplate and reflect on each activity done.

For batik, it was a hands-on workshop where students were given a brief lecture on the art form before experiencing batik-making. The intervention with wayangkulit involved the students attending a talk by a wayangkulit expert, and viewing wayangkulit puppets' exhibition after the talk. As for contemporary Malaysian art, a visit was made to a local art gallery to view an exhibition that displayed various Malaysian artists' expression of their life and experience as Malaysians, their view

of world issues and events. Finally, for Mah Meri masks, a visit was made to a Mah Meri cultural village. The visit included a short lecture about this tribe, a tour of the village to view some ritual sites, viewing of wood sculptures and masks, experiencing a mock Mah Meri wedding ceremony and trying out some weaving activities.

The last intervention at Cycle 2 was an open-themed project that students had to complete after they had participated in the intervention activities. The project required the students to select a social, health, or environmental issue and solve it through graphic design. The students were given 3 weeks to complete the project. At Cycle 3, a focus group interview, was carried out upon collecting and analysing the data from the previous cycle. Figure 1 features the three cycles in this action research.
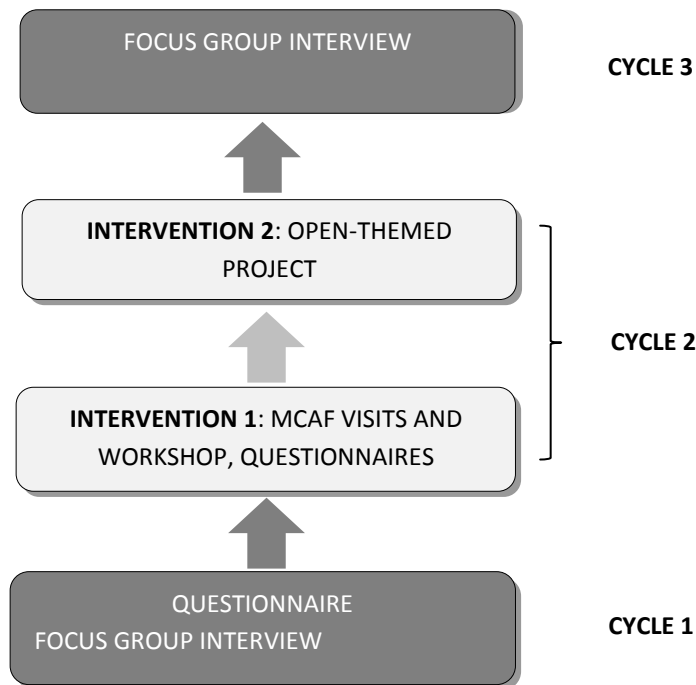
Figure 1: *The Three Cycles in this Case Study Action Research*

3. Findings

Before participating in the intervention activities, the students mentioned that, in Cycle 1's focus group interview and questionnaire, there was vague knowledge and not much interest in these MCAF. This was due to lack of exposure or previous encounter with some of the MCAF was seen as a school chore. The results from the findings show that there is a difference in the students'

knowledge of the selected MCAF after participating in the intervention activities, carried out in Cycle 2.

For batik, the take-home lesson for them was that there is a lot of effort put into this handmade art form that has so much intricacy involved in the making of it. When it came to wayangkulit, the students learned from the talk that it is a dying art and are saddened by the thought of the possibility of losing this art form in the future. Contemporary Malaysian art viewed in the exhibition made the students realise that this art form contains pluralistic views from the various artists' experiences, unique to a multicultural setting. The experience in the Mah Meri cultural village was vast and an eye-opener for most of the students. Although initially the plan was to study the carvings, the trip ended up exposing the students to the lifestyle and way of thinking of this indigenous tribe. Students had commented that the Mah Meri is more advanced than the city folks in their way of thinking. They also enjoyed the trip as it was away from the city. The summary of the results is found in Table 1.

Table 1: *Summary of Results*

Research Cycle	Data Collection Method/Intervention Activity	Results
1	Focus group interview Questionnaire	Students were unaware, not interested, could not relate to some of these MCAF, particularly Mah Meri masks.
2	Batik workshop& questionnaire	They found the workshop fun, learnt that it was not easy to create batik design, and appreciated the details and tedious process.
	Wayangkulit talk & exhibition, & questionnaire	Saddened by the slow "death" of wayangkulit due to non-appreciation and non-preservation of this art form.
	Contemporary Malaysian art& questionnaire	Amazed that contemporary Malaysian art could have so many different meanings.
	Mah Meri cultural village& questionnaire	Enjoyed a culture that was very different to the city life, found that the Mah Meri culture was even more advance in thinking compared to city

		folks.
	Open-themed project (Creative Outcome of students)	Some applied (refer to Figures 2, 3 and 4) what they had learnt in intervention activities into their work, while others did not.
3	Focus group interview	A majority of the students found that the intervention activities have enabled them to experience MCAF that they had either taken granted of or not known before. As a result, their knowledge had been enhanced.

When it comes to the open-themed project at Cycle 2, although less than half the class's work featured visual influences from the interventions, the data from the focus group interview conducted at Cycle 3 found that their knowledge about MCAF seemed to have been enhanced.

Figure 2 features a logo designed by CCY, featuring batik motif in the background. This logo aims to create public awareness about love for animals. The student equates it to the appreciation of batik. GKY's design (Figure 3) aimed at promoting the freedom to practise religion. Inspired by wayangkulit's concept of light and shadow, GKY emphasised that all religions are equal in enlightening our minds. In Figure 4, JY's design is subtly influenced by wayangkulit details such as the light source, a puppet stick that support the puppy carried by the girl and tiny cutout patterns on the girl's dress. The message was that strays are just as precious as the dying art of wayangkulit.

Figure 2: *A Logo Design by CCY, Featuring Batik Motif in the Background*

Figure 3: *Wayangkulit-Inspired Design by GKY*

Figure 4: *Wayangkulit-Inspired Design by JY*

4. Discussion

Contrasting to the general knowledge that they had on batik and wayangkulit, the students had very little of Mah Meri masks and not much about contemporary Malaysian art. Seeing Mah Meri masks was very rare for them. Contemporary Malaysian art faired a little better, compared to Mah Meri masks but still not as frequently seen by these students as batik and wayangkulit. The students had very little understanding of the cultural meanings of Mah Meri. Although the number for understanding the cultural meanings of contemporary Malaysian art was higher than Mah Meri's, it was still considered low because it is less than half the class.

The overall reflection on the answers regarding initial understanding of the four MCAF is that the students had an awareness of what is batik and wayangkulit, some awareness of what is contemporary Malaysian art and very little awareness of Mah Meri masks. The most commonly seen visual cultural art forms, of the 4, were batik and wayangkulit while the least seen was Mah Meri masks. As for contemporary Malaysian art, it was averagely seen. Experience in making batik was the highest, followed by the experience of watching wayangkulit performance, the next was producing works that contain elements of contemporary Malaysian art and the lowest was the experience in making a Mah Meri mask or watching one being made. Lastly, less than half the class understood the cultural meanings of each of the MCAF.

Therefore, the researcher initiated the planning and designing of intervention activities about the four MCAF into a graphic design classroom. This was so that the students would gain a better and deeper understanding through experiencing those MCAF because learning takes place through experience (Kolb, 2014).

Before participating in each MCAF's activity, the students' comments geared towards more negative connotation such as that they did not know the existence of some of the MCAF, had little knowledge, those MCAF were old and irrelevant, they were not interesting enough to grab their attention. This could be due to the lack of experience and exposure of the students in learning and understanding more of these MCAF. Upon completing the MCAF activities, the researcher noticed a change in the students' comments that showed better understanding and appreciation of the MCAF in terms of their forms, cultural meanings and making processes. Table 2 summarises the students' knowledge and awareness of MCAF before and after the interventions.

Table 2: *Summary of Students' MCAF Knowledge and Awareness Before and After Intervention*

MCAF	Students' Knowledge and Awareness Before Intervention	Students' Knowledge and Awareness After Intervention
Batik	There is some general knowledge but not in-depth.	Find batik making fun and a meaningful process.
WayangKulit	There is some general knowledge but not in-depth.	The details on the puppet are intricate and could inspire future modern designs.
Mah Meri	Poor, due to lack of exposure.	Better understanding of Mah Meri

| Masks | | lifestyle and the cultural meanings in the wood carving. |
| Contemporary Malaysian Art | Average, had some experience viewing the art form. | Have a wider scope of Malaysian culture. |

It is an interesting observation by the researcher that the MCAF that are found in this study's sample of students' graphic design work mainly based on wayangkulit and batik. This could be because of the strong visual and conceptual qualities that are found in these two MCAF (Orr, 1974; Van Roojen, 1993; Soemantri, 1998; Legino 2012; Siti Sarah Adam Wan et al., 2015; Lin, 2016; Wong & Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof, 2018). Another more plausible reason could be that the students' exposure to the MCAF from the intervention activities had more direct involvement in wayangkulit and batik. They were able to see the actual wayangkulit puppets and attended a talk about them; and they had hands-on experience making batik in the workshop. In that regard, direct contact through touch and actions made these students' learning more engaging (Dunlosky et al., 2013).Culturally Responsive Teaching(CRT), was aptly applied because it enables and motivates the students to learn more about their own culture through MCAF. CRT utilises students' identities and backgrounds as meaningful sources for creating optimal learning environments and share with peers from different cultures (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Nieto, 2000; Lee, 2012).

The intervention activities had been an important catalyst to kickstart the practice of incorporating MCAF into a Malaysian graphic design classroom. The MCAF in the intervention activities were limited to 4 types so that students could begin learning more about MCAF through the intervention activities. Intervention activities could serve to introduce students to a few MCAF. This acts as a scaffold and a guide for them to do further research about other MCAF.

5. Conclusion

The outcome after participating in the MCAF activities was quite different from before the participation. The students spoke and commented at such length that they had fun, some of them in awe or even in disbelief of their discovery of each MCAF and that each MCAF had its uniqueness. There was more understanding in not only the cultural meanings of those MCAF but also the making processes, appreciation for the delicate beauty and details in those MCAF and a break from seeing those MCAF as merely old and traditional.

Although only a handful of the students had included the visual influences of some of the MCAF into their design work, their overall knowledge about MCAF has been enhanced through the intervention activities. From the results of this study, intervention activities that the selected group of graphic design students participated in – workshops, visits to the art gallery and cultural village, attending a talk, sharing about one's learning experience through questionnaire and focus group interviews, and completing an open-themed design project – had created better understanding in the students of their knowledge in MCAF. CRT, which focuses on utilising cultural elements familiar to the students for them to learn more about their own culture, had been a suitable pedagogy for this study. The students have found that there is a benefit for them to learn in a graphic design course where MCAF is incorporated into their learning. A better understanding of their knowledge in MCAF provides them more inspiration for creative design work.

Intervention activities are viable as part of graphic design education, particularly when in a multicultural setting like in Malaysia where cultural art forms are in abundance. However, it must be noted that the limitations of this study is that the study was conducted on one class of 20 students of one semester in a graphic design course in a particular private university. Therefore the data from that particular sample would mean that the findings were unique to that class only. As such, the researcher did not aim to generalise the findings.

The following are suggestions by the researcher for future studies:

i. To conduct a similar study but include more MCAF, besides the four that had been selected for this study, into a graphic design course.

ii. The future study could involve a larger group of Malaysian graphic design students for richer data collection.

iii. The future study could be conducted for a longer duration of time, to enable the researcher to run more cycles of the action research for richer data collection.

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