Looking to Otherness for a collaborative learning experience

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Introduction

This paper deals with a series of issues which need to be taken into consideration when contemplating an international design studio collaboration. It is intended to act as a guide for those considering a joint didactic experience in the future by illustrating good practices and unforeseen consequences. The text discusses how these issues were dealt with in regards to two schools - the Manchester School of Architecture (UK) and the University of Salerno (Italy).

The comments on our experiences will aim at reflecting upon on issues, which may inform the process of orchestrating future collaborations and intended outcomes, stressing along the way the need to make continuous adjustments in order to ensure improvement. This text touches upon how a didactic collaborative experience can serve to augment typical research methods for students in the design process. Specific results will be shown through a selection of images and excerpts from videos in order to show the issues that need to be taken into consideration when orchestrating a common project.

Our didactic experience, in actuality, spanned over two academic years and consequently two separate design workshops. The first, titled Ma.Chi.Na_ Heterotopian Investigations of the Urban Spaces in Naples, Chicago and Manchester, was a design experiment, as well as a theoretical investigation, into the issues of contemporary urban space and on the potential relationships that could be found between seemingly unrelated sites found in selected areas of the cities of Naples, Chicago, and Manchester. The second experience, Rethinking the Grand Tour - The Experience of Visiting Paestum today, dealt with the interpretation of the archaeological site of Paestum within the contemporary terrain vague condition of the entire territory. Additional factors of otherness, were present in both workshops. In the case of the former, it was the “virtual” participation of another group of students from Washington State University in the United States who were visiting Chicago. In the case of the latter, it was the Department of Art History at the University of Salerno who provided us access to its archives and the impressive collection of prints by Piranesi contained within it.

Needs to be considered

Prior to venturing into any international collaboration key needs must be taken into consideration: 1) the need to establish both common and individual goals of each participating party, 2) the need to have a logistical plan set in place, but one that is flexible if things start to go astray, 3) the need to attain support both from academic home institutions and from outside sources (if possible), 4) the need to disseminate the results into the wider public realm, 5) and the need think of the event not as a finite one, but one that can serve as part of a great agenda.

The need to establish both common and individual goals

Long before students are involved in any didactic experience, it is obvious that extensive preparations have to be made by the instructors. What is less obvious is how to ensure that the experience proposed is beneficial to all parties. Key to this process working successfully is the development of understanding the academic level of students with whom you are dealing, i.e. their skill sets. In addition to skills, it is important to consider what intangible qualities, such as openness to otherness, might also be beneficial. Students who possess a strong desire to learn from other cultures and see the benefits of exchanging ideas tend to thrive in such situations. Those who feel forced into participating, however, may remain introverted in their view of the world and thus they may tend to flounder. Their apathy may also serve as a distraction to those who are keen to participate in the experience.

Regarding the skill level, it is important that all the participants have some level of compatibility
in this aspect. Complimentary skills regarded as another form of learning from otherness are often helpful, but if one group dominates the other in too many aspects the experience can potentially falter.

Whilst it is important to understand what the students can bring to the table, it is equally important to understand what the instructors want the students to learn from the experience. This often involves each instructor having to meet the requirements of his/her home institution and his/her individual philosophical and pedagogical approaches. This crucial matter cannot be neglected. Once they are taken into account and discussed between the individual instructors, then a common ground amongst them must be established regarding the content of the experience. Again, if one party dominates and a clear dialogue was not achieved, the benefits of the experience will not serve all participants properly.

In our case

Alessandra had to meet Salerno’s 4th year studio requirement of investigating urban territories as part of her curriculum whilst George had to juggle varying requirements of a mixed group of 5th and 6th year students from his MSA BArch unit displacement/non-place. Both of us shared an interest in non-conventional, theoretical experiments that could lead to readings of sites/urban spaces/territories from personal interpretations, rather than from merely empirical data.

Whilst Alessandra’s emphasis was placed on getting her students to make a strong connection between theoretical investigation and design process, George was trying to get his British students to understand that the act of displacement into an unfamiliar context, Italy, could serve as a means of having them confront their preconceived notions/cultural biases in the design process. The non-place part of the equation, intended to have his students investigate the ubiquitous condition found in sites/territories which have lost their meanings over time; consideration of heterotopias was an important part of this equation. After a series of brainstorming sessions, it was decided that Michel Foucault’s, seminal text On Other Places would, in fact, suit both our pedagogical agendas as well as the curricular requirements of our home institutions.

Fig. 1. Students presenting their results at first workshop at the University of Salerno, 2010

The need to establish a logistical, yet flexible, plan

Whilst it is noble to set a goal of achieving a high intellectual standard, it would be irresponsible not to have proper practical issues taken into consideration in the planning phases. A list of issues to be sorted prior to any event taking place should include, but not be limited to: 1) securing facilities to hold events, 2) determining the exact number of participating students from each contingency, 3) inviting and defining the roles of additional professionals and educators who may potentially participate, 4) securing lodging and transportation for guests, 5) determining what the actual outcomes might be, 5) coordinating and negotiating with colleagues with whom students are concurrently taking classes, etc.

In our case

The University of Salerno provided the facilities to hold the events, but there were only a limited amount of accessible workshops and computers available, which in turn, informed what we could expect as outputs. Ratios also affected the quality of the experiences. The ratio between Italian to British students was roughly 75 to 15, respectively in both years. In the second year, many MSA students felt overwhelmed by the numbers of their counterparts. The ratio of instructors to students also played a major role and we were fortunate in both occasions to be joined by Neapolitan architect and film maker, Maria Totaro and phd students of Alessandra, all of whom brought other skills (including a knowledge of the English language) and insight which greatly enhanced the experience for all. Alessandra was able to find the MSA contingency lodging at reasonable rates. The last issue, that of dealing with colleagues, became more of an issue than either of us had anticipated.
The need to attain support both from academic home institutions and others

An ideal situation for any international collaboration would be to have proper support set in place both from the academic institutions involved and from outside sources if possible. This support is mainly financial, but just as crucial is the support of colleagues willing to accommodate any inconvenience that your experience might cause them due to scheduling issues.

In our case

Both financial and collegial support were lacking. Financial support was minimum for students, particularly those travelling from Britain to Italy, and both sets of colleagues were not exactly keen to accommodate minor changes, such rescheduling their classes or even swapping their classroom/studio spaces.

Financial support from the MSA beyond paying for the instructor's expenses was limited. The University of Salerno initially provided space and limited funds from a source intended for cultural events, a sum which recently has been abolished, due to lack of money. The lack of any substantial funding from either institution in the first year, led Alessandra to propose that the two schools of architecture sign an Erasmus exchange agreement which then could provide some financial assistance. An application was set forth by the University of Salerno, but never came to fruition for numerous reasons: 1) establishment of such exchange programmes between European nations was a relatively easy task, but in the UK, as we discovered, there was a lengthy process of accepting proposed partners at the university level, not at the level of a single faculty or school, 2) the MSA, being a joint school set within strictly defined responsibilities of a contractual agreement between two universities, rejected the University of Salerno’s proposal as it did not meet the standards of the university responsible for the establishing exchange programmes, 3) the Head of the MSA, although supportive in principle, was not willing to deviate from the contractual agreement which would have allowed the other of the two universities to approve the proposal. Instead of looking to the otherness set within the MSA as a solution to a problem, the intransigence of the Head of the MSA left us with no means of utilising the Erasmus exchange as at source of other financial support.

This simple act of intransigence was not unique to only one of our colleagues in the collaborations, but surfaced in those who were involved with the scheduling and direct delivery of courses which students were supposed to be taking during the time frame of our didactic experiences. Their inflexibility led to unforeseen negative consequences for all participants: 1) what could have been intense workshops lasting 5 continuous days, instead turned into 11 days of disjointed experiences lacking in momentum, 2) Salerno students had to juggle classes and workloads of other courses which left them limited time to meet with the MSA students, 3) the MSA students had to stretch their money for food and lodging to 11 days, and 4) the MSA, in addition to paying for the instructor's extended days of food and lodging, had to pay to cover the other classes he was scheduled to be teaching back in Britain.

Lessons to be learned are not to take either types of support for granted and to seek alternative methods to still make the didactic experiences successful for all. It is also important to take into consideration how your collaborations affect other colleagues and how they, in turn, may not be willing to accommodate your needs.

Fig. 2. From top to bottom: University of Salerno student work from studio project, Heterotopia Workshop outcome, images that informed the outcome from the workshop

The need to disseminate the results into the wider public the realm

The outcomes of collaborations are both tangible and intangible. The former are more easily under the control of the organizing instructors,
whilst the latter may be more due to forces of serendipity.

Tangible outcomes which result from shared didactic experiences can simply end with the event or, with proper consideration and effort, can be disseminated in order to have an impact on others beyond just the participants. Visionary proposals by students can serve to educate others both within the discipline and outside of it. Selecting venues to disseminate products can be highly controlled or result from the timing of events not related to the academic calendar. Sometimes luck, both good and bad, come into play.

Intangible results may not necessarily be planned, but may be a product of the chemistry generated by the participants of each didactic experience. The bonds created between people can be promoted by establishing an infrastructure and guidance can be given to facilitate interpersonal relationships, but it is largely a phenomenon left to the devices of the students. In essence, are the students truly open to looking for otherness in a collaborative learning experience?

In our case

The results were mixed – some were in our control, many were not. We had always hoped that students would create interpersonal relationships which would lead to informal dialogues in the future, both on a cultural and intellectual level. The participants in the first year collaboration had done just that, as they understood the benefit of establishing friendships in other cultures. Alessandra worked with her particular group of Salerno students previously, which translated into her students trusting her judgement in having them engage in an international collaboration. George’s group was dominated by 6th year students whose keenness to experience the otherness in Italy, set a strong example to follow for his few 5th year students.

In the second year, Alessandra inherited a new group of students who were still unfamiliar with her teaching approach. This seemed to lead to many of them being less interested in the experience. George’s group was then dominated by 5th year students, many of whom falsely professed to be open learning from otherness, but in fact wanted things to run only as they would have in Britain.

The first group of Salerno students retained their enthusiasm past the actual workshop to assist Alessandra in disseminating the work in three locations to various audiences: 1) to other students in Salerno, particularly those within their disciplines of architecture and civil engineering, 2) to other European students of architecture at the EASA assembly (which as our good luck would have it, was coincidently held) in Manchester the following summer, and 3) to others in the form of the general Italian public at the Futuro Remoto exhibition at the Città della Scienza museum in Naples.

In addition to the exhibitions, both of us also gave a lecture on the first workshop experience to the EASA assembly. An intangible benefit from our collaborative experience was that six Salerno students attended the assembly in Manchester, representing that year the largest contingency from any single Italian university. Informal dialogues continued that summer as two of George’s MSA students were working at the assembly.

During Alessandra’s trip to give the lecture, we also took the opportunity to persevere beyond our Erasmus exchange debacle to try to establish an Erasmus exchange work placement agreement between the University of Salerno and a design orientated studio in Manchester whose members were part time academics. This less restrictive agreement meant we could side step any university approval involved within the MSA. Whilst the programme provided funds for a Salerno student to gain practical work experience with an architecture studio, it also provided an informal link to the MSA for a short period of time. We, in effect, looked to another form of Erasmus exchange to provide a collaborative experience.

The following year, although two Salerno students were scheduled to participate separately in the Erasmus work placement, only one managed to take advantage of the experience. The first student was, in fact, overwhelmed by the otherness and had to return to Italy. Overlooking an intangible detail, that of understanding any negative emotional impact that otherness may have on an individual, resulted in an unfortunate experience for the
student as well as for all of us who tried to orchestrate this mini collaboration.

More unfortunate experiences were to follow. The physical work produced in the workshop in the second year was supposed to be part of a greater exhibition at the University of Salerno which involved the Art History department. It was then to return to Manchester to be exhibited at the RIBA gallery, but to date because of some unforeseen academic politics (as our bad luck would have it), neither has come to fruition. We still hope to disseminate the work in an exhibition or by other means.

Again, we learned that attaining the cooperation of others, colleagues in particular, is often needed to make any experience work smoothly, even beyond the initial event.

Fig. 3. Alessandra and George giving a lecture on the Ma.Chi.Na. workshop at the EASA assembly in Manchester, summer of 2010

The need think of the event not as a finite one, but one that can serve as part of a great agenda

A collaboration may be thought of as an event which continues merely by the dissemination of its outcomes into the public realm, but its lifespan may be considered to serve other intentions, also. If the event itself can be orchestrated properly as part of a greater research agenda for the students, it can become an integral part of their studio experience. If sites for said projects occur in the country of the other school, friendships can be utilised to informally exchange knowledge. Access to historical and empirical data which are often difficult to obtain, but crucial to enriching the design process, can be facilitated through such friendships.

In our case

Each group of students from the first year did, in fact, form bonds with the students from the other country. The new friendships assisted in developing their intellectual interests and they assisted one another in accessing information beyond the initial workshop. The group from the second year experience formed no such bond. As a result, for those - both Italians and British alike - who did not have a genuine interest in exploring the potential of otherness as a means of learning, the experience resulted in a missed opportunity. Their apathy also indirectly had a negative effect on those who were actually engaged in the process. The timing of the second workshop (which caused many problems with MSA staffing back in Britain) was to coincide with the inauguration of the Futuro Remoto exhibition in Naples. Due to some unforeseen problems, the inflexible attitude of some in the MSA students started to cause rifts not only with Italian participants, but from within the group.

The positive result for the British students, however, was that they were able to expand upon the knowledge they gained from the experience in Italy to formulate yearlong studio projects.

The lesson learned from this experience is to understand what you as the instructor/organiser can and cannot control.

Fig. 4 Student outputs exhibited as part of a greater exhibition, Futuro Remoto, at the Città della Scienza museum in Naples, 2010
are left to chance – is also crucial. The key to orchestrating a successful didactic experience, in particular one which is looking to otherness for a collaborative learning experience, is retaining a sense of openness and sensitivity. Persevering through initial set backs when they occur is also a key to making said collaborations well worth the effort.

Conclusion

Collaborative experiences are not easy tasks, especially when dealing with more than one country where otherness in procedural, cultural, and linguistic matters may lead to unfortunate misunderstandings. In the planning phases prior to said experiences taking place, careful consideration of obvious and hidden complexities must be taken into account. Trying to understand how such a simple collaboration may affect others and how dependent sometimes the organisers are on other sources – some of which are in their control, whilst some