

Look Around You, Look Inside You: Exploring Heritage in the Design Classroom

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Abstract

How can students at a federally-designated Hispanic-serving institution understand and express culture and diversity through art and design? In order to address this inquiry and to exemplify a method that introduces students to critical thinking in the context of design, I am presenting a case study based on the primary results of a project implemented at an introductory graphic design class, which is part of a multidisciplinary arts program. In this project, students learn basics of design research and auto-ethnography in a studio setting, in order to explore heritage and culture, their context of living, family history, and personal connections with their past, present, and future. Results from this discovery stage inform brainstorming, sketching, design, and production of a book that contains multiple visual explorations on “Heritage.” Some of the most memorable and productive conversations and interactions between students took place not only during the development of the project, but at the final project presentation, which exposed their capacity to develop greater tolerance and a more empathic view of *the other*, to be open to reanalyze their context and personal interactions, to better evaluate the design abilities of their peers as they respond to their own individual approach to the topic, and to develop a better and safer sense of place in the classroom.

Keywords: Design Research, Design Pedagogy, Cultural Identity, Heritage, Empathy, Design Philosophy

Design education in the United States continues to be highly Eurocentric. From the glorification of Gutenberg’s letterpress invention to the systemic praise to the Bauhaus, design students are largely exposed to design history, knowledge and practice that builds on a historically Western, “first world” take on design, where there is very little space for exploration and discovery of the role of design in the development of other global cultures and societies through time. Such learning gaps tend to exclude students from experiencing the influence and impact of design and art in social development and cultural identity in a practical way.

Aiming to explore alternative non-colonialist design teaching methods that seek to correct this dominant representation of the history of design (Adamson, Riello, & Teasley, 2011), in 2016 I developed a project for an Introduction to Graphic Design course that is part of a multidisciplinary arts program (Bachelor of Arts in Fine Arts) at the University of Houston-Downtown (UHD). A Federally designated Hispanic-serving university, UHD had a Hispanic and/or Latino student representation of 48.6% in 2016. In the same year, 22.1% of students enrolled were African American, and 15.8% were White/Caucasian. Asian or Pacific Islander students represented 9.8% of the population (Office of Institutional Research, 2017). This diverse population (much of which has experienced immigration in their lifetime, as well as significant cultural separation from their home countries or their parents’ culture) has limited

opportunities to reconnect or even rediscover their heritage as higher education students. As Juliana Jones points out, to a great extent these students are “shaped by their cultural environment,” the place they now live in, internalizing cultural values (Jones, 2011) that may not exactly be the ones they originally identified with or come from. Many of these students struggle with finding their own place in society and the higher education system as immigrants or children of immigrants in an environment that is dual and many times conflicting, where family and community traditions, language and culture confront the pressure to acquire, adapt and prevail in the American society and economy.

The project, called “40 Ways to Visualize Heritage,” was created to facilitate design learning with a focus on cultural identity and heritage while supporting students with developing a sense of place, self-worth, and understanding of *the other*. In this paper I present methods and findings from the application of this project during two long semesters in a class composed by freshmen/sophomores, many of whom have never been exposed to exploratory visual methods. The discussion in the following pages includes the benefits of activating design learning methods to support the democratization of heritage engagement (Purkis, 2017) through the implementation of introductory design research activities employing artistic exploration.

Framework and Theoretical Base

The class project was first introduced through a series of lectures using simple concepts related to culture, heritage and identity. The Center for Heritage and Society of the University of Massachusetts Amherst offers a very comprehensive definition of heritage, explained as “the full range of our inherited traditions, monuments, objects, and culture. Most important, it is the range of contemporary activities, meanings, and behaviors that we draw from them.” (Center for Heritage and Society, University of Massachusetts Amherst, n.d.). Students in the class were given this and similar definitions and were then invited to discuss what heritage means for them and those around. With the intention to jumpstart critical thinking and to continue building a more tolerant class environment, students shared short oral stories about their geographic origin, cultural identity, and/or family traditions with an approach that supports open-mindedness and self-empathy with their own background (i.e., at first, many students tended to minimize the relevance of their own heritage or culture compared to others’—several White American students, for example, showed lack of interest in exploring their origin because they believed their “whiteness” *is not interesting enough*), in order to identify similarities and differences within their group. Since the beginning of the project, students are asked to identify and reflect on social preconceptions and implicit bias during class discussions, which may limit in-depth exploration of conceptual, artistic, and inclusive ways to express heritage holistically.

In general, these introductory theoretical exercises are based on oral discussions that also resulted in the identification of keywords and central topics that influence the project for the class as a whole. At first, students discover a general tendency to reason their and others’ heritage and cultural backgrounds in a rather stereotypical fashion, showing the imposition of colonized interpretations and representations of indigenous and non-western cultures which have helped construct narratives of cultural reality (Rogal, 2016). A mental shift towards a

deeper understanding of heritage through the progressive discovery of cultural meanings and interpretations allowed them to de-center their worldview “in order to better comprehend different value systems” (Rogal, 2016) even within cultures that they have identified with during their lifetime. This kind of auto-ethnographic research also includes the study of signs and symbols within communities and family/social circles, which in a demographically diverse classroom resulted in a more insightful and inclusive discovery of cross-cultural communication (Jones, 2011), including language differences and similarities and local, national, and global traditions, and how they influence the way we share and develop multicultural relationships.

The class project had a strong art and design focus. Principles of graphic design methods were introduced for several weeks prior and during the implementation of the project, in order to enable students to understand and further visualize their cultural research. All students in the class were given a shared framework where visual thinking (Lupton & Phillips, 2015) was emphasized to facilitate the organization and categorization of research about heritage that could be visually expressed in small parts, each of which addresses a specific design concept.

Project Methods

The “40 Ways to Visualize Heritage” project considers one specific mode of design research: *Research Through Design* (Laurel, 2003), focusing on the use of methodologies to address a problem, provoke inquiry and propose solutions through the development of a project. In many ways, *Research Through Design* is not about what is being designed after all, but rather the knowledge it is being produced from the process (Storni, 2015). It informs the development of design from the beginning, resulting in more honest communication separated from persuasion (Laurel, 2003). This approach supported the facilitation of a creative and tolerant environment where students were able to employ art and design principles to identify and research their heritage, discover what it means within their own cultural context, and explore iterative visualizations, in order to produce a series of mini-case studies that would open spaces to leverage empathy and further discuss issues on culture, diversity, and inclusion.

During the project’s introductory stages, mind maps visualizing preconceptions of heritage were used to spark students’ inquiry, followed by discussions on cultural stereotyping (Figure 1). This led to three weeks of discovery complemented by short exercises of experimental artistic creation, such as the development of “cultural” color palettes—reflecting on the use of color within their culture, inspired by foods, fabrics, flags, traditional dresses, and nature—and production/reproduction of textures from rubbing over surfaces (weavings, rough materials, carvings, furniture) or by using multimedia and collaging employing cultural ephemera, storybooks, magazine clippings, newspapers, food wraps, festive supplies (*papel picado*, used traditionally as decoration for Mexican celebrations was a specially popular material among students exploring their Mexican, Aztec or Maya heritage), spices or dry leaves (Figure 2).



Figure 1: Project mind map samples.

Auto-ethnography and observation, as well as 1-on-1 interviews were the most relevant methods students used to investigate their own cultural context (Figure 2). Their first research subjects were themselves; then, their families, social circles, and familial historic documents. Students were asked to also keep a visual and written journal to collect reflections on every tradition they are part of that represents their cultural heritage and identity and to investigate their origin.

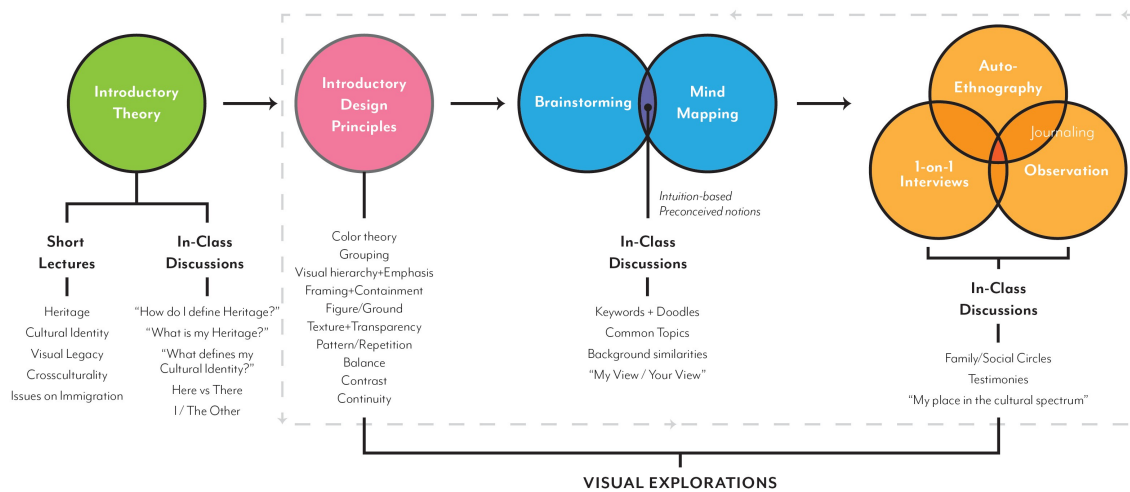


Figure 2: Diagram of project methods and activities.

During class conversations on these methods, students expressed their findings by orally describing the intricacies of dishes that characterize their cultural identity (a student expressed a mix of surprise and pride after discovering that her husbands' Australian nationality has progressively changed her Irish/Polish culture gastronomically—I now enjoy baking Pavlova

more than cakes!), the continuity of traditional dances in their family festivities (a student of Cuban descent: *learning to salsa dance is a rite of passage for our family*), the meaning of traditional dresses, patterns, language, and symbols that perpetuate cultural unity, the relevance of traveling to countries considered the origin of their cultural heritage and their family's identity (various students with Mexican parents: *every year/time I visit Mexico I feel I'm going back to my roots*), and the benefits or conflicts that arise from living in the United States while maintaining a multicultural background. One Colombian-American student in particular shared a testimony that led to a class discussion on social pressure and discrimination in the context of cultural heritage:

I was born in the United States—I never learned Spanish well, although I was raised in a predominantly Hispanic neighborhood. Especially during my teenage years, my friends would make fun of me because of my broken Spanish. I grew up being bullied because I wasn't Colombian enough.

Written testimonies using hand-drawn lettering was one design technique some students used to reflect findings and observations from their journals and after participating in oral discussions.

For the duration of the project (six weeks) students produced forty 3x3-inch visual interpretations of their cultural research using the following design/art principles: color theory, grouping, visual hierarchy, emphasis, framing and containment, figure/ground relationships, texture, pattern/repetition, balance, transparency, contrast, and continuity. At the end of the six weeks, students would participate in a final critique session where all forty solutions were shared with the class (composed by 15-20 students) in a book format (Figure 3). Each student was given time to review all their classmates' books (an activity that took approximately 30 minutes), leading to a class discussion on how the production of these 40-solution books changed their perspective of heritage, *the other*, and their own cultural identity, as well as their position on design as a tool for cultural empowerment.



Figure 3: Two “40 Ways to Visualize Heritage” project samples. Individual designs, closed, and open flag books. On top, the project belongs to a student who visualized her Polish-Irish-Australian-San Franciscan heritage. On the bottom, the project visualizes a student’s heritage of Oaxacan/Mexican-American background.

Preliminary Conclusions and Further Steps

The facilitation of opportunities for sustainable, culturally-sensitive, and inclusive creative activities in institutions of higher education that serve multi-ethnic and culturally diverse students is relevant to guarantee safe learning spaces and to generate an equitable sense of place. Students of international origin or from multicultural backgrounds are a source of inspiration not only for their own peers, but also for academics. My former undergraduate students from the University of Houston-Downtown exposed points of view and experiences in class that helped me expand the reach of design teaching and design knowledge into a more pragmatic and context-aware sphere, where the opportunities to explore the resolution of real-world problems with social, economic, or developmental impact prevail while facilitating tolerance and better class dynamics.

Students who participated in the “40 Ways to Visualize Heritage” project demonstrated a deeper understanding of heritage and cultural identity after its completion. As the project progressed and they participated in more lectures, discussions, visualization exercises, and critiques, students gained stronger reasoning of their own world vision, discovering that it is based on different beliefs, interpretations of forms and practices of everyday life that underpin culture, their provided explanations of origin, as well as understanding of their own “self” (Fry, 2017). Many students belonging to first and second-generation immigrant families, for example, exposed an issue that it is not sufficiently explored or visualized within design teaching and practice: journeys from the third to the first world, and the difficulties to replace one way of life with a new one (Alden, 2011). By producing their 40-solution book, they visually unveiled mental, cultural, and social transitions, as well as physical, social and economic changes that occur during and after geographic mobilization, often resulting in the disintegration of cultural traditions (Alden, 2011). For many of these students, being able to unearth and revive their culture was an empowering way to show pride and reveal their identity, allowing their peers to familiarize with non-stereotypical expressions of culture.

Reflecting on the project’s further exploration, I discovered theoretical weaknesses in topics such as design for/with the global south; the relevance of diasporas to inform culturally-conscious design practices; the role of *Borderland* and *Border Thinking* design issues in the inclusion and leveraging of diversity and heritage in design research; and the integration of Latinx/Hispanic, African-American, and Native designers, Middle-Eastern and Asian design practices and issues as pivotal sources of inspiration. These topics were discussed only on the surface during class discussions mostly due to time constraints. They require deeper consideration in order to enrich design dialogues and to expand ethnographic practices.

In order to increase the reach and impact of this project, I’m expanding its sources and elaborating on contents, methodologies, and definitions of possible design deliverables in order to start implementing it in the graduate design classroom as well. Graduate students perform in an environment that can enrich social design thinking and research discussions by providing solutions with a more practical, real-world use. These students may reevaluate ways in which their own notion of heritage can produce stronger social awareness, better collaborations, and multi-ethnic co-creation. At this point, graduate students researching heritage and cultural diversity in design can engage in a more involved process of

interpreting content, explore its visualization, and apply critical thinking to determine how best to connect with people empathically, how to successfully craft a message relevant to a particular audience and deliver it through the most culturally-appropriate media (Alden, 2011).

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Author Biography

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Gaby Hernandez is an Assistant Professor of Graphic Design at the University of Florida. Her research interests include social design research, community engagement, and diversity in design. For over 10 years, she has developed collaborative design projects in information design, editorial design, branding, entrepreneurship, and design for development with scientists, multidisciplinary teams, non-profit organizations, minority groups, and indigenous communities nationally and internationally. Her work has been peer-reviewed, published, and presented at

multiple design conferences, including the International Design Research Society Biannual Conference and the AIGA Design Educators Conference. From 2013 to 2017, she also worked as Assistant Professor of Graphic Design at the University of Houston-Downtown, where she founded and directed the *Graphic Design Research Initiative*, a design and mentorship program developing real-world projects with design students from minorities focusing on design research and social design. Gaby is the Education Director of the AIGA (*the professional association for design*) Gainesville Chapter, member of the AIGA Diversity & Inclusion Task Force, and the AIGA Design Educators Community Committee.