Visual hermeneutics and the fusion of horizons: Reflections on a globally networked learning project with graphic design students from three countries

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Abstract

The paper discusses a globally networked learning project with graphic design students from Mexico, the United States of America, and South Africa. Globally networked learning (GNL) aims for cost-effective internationalization strategies where digital platforms replace physical student exchanges. The project was designed according to Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) principles, which included ice-breaker activities at the beginning of the project and reflection activities at the end. The participating students, who were all of a similar age and nearing the end of their undergraduate curriculum, were asked to identify one well-known designer from the geographic region in which their home university is located, as well as an already completed visual communication design produced by this designer. The participants were also required to discuss how the visual features of the chosen design link with the visual culture of the geographic region.

Methodologically, the paper is an ex-post reflection that focuses on selected features of the COIL project guided by theoretical concepts from visual hermeneutics, or the processes of interpretation and validation as applied to visual statements. The emphasis is on the notion of fusing horizons, which stems from Gadamer's version of the hermeneutic circle, where a first interpretation merges with a second interpretation after the interpretant was faced with a new situation. In the case of the COIL project discussed in this paper, the student's first interpretation of how the visual features of the chosen design link with the visual culture of the geographic region at the beginning of the project fuse with a second interpretation at the end of the project after having encountered the new situation of interacting digitally with graphic design students from another country. In this way, the main learning outcome of acquiring a deeper understanding of diversity in the context of design practice through a process of international collaboration was achieved.

Keywords: collaborative online international learning (COIL), fusion of horizons, graphic design education, visual hermeneutics

Introduction

Against the background of lockdowns and restrictions related to the global COVID-19 pandemic, this paper is located at a place where local culture, learning through technology, as well as the influences of the fourth industrial revolution (4IR) on higher education converge. The paper discusses a globally networked learning project with graphic design students from Mexico, the United States of America, and South Africa. Globally networked learning (GNL) aims for cost-effective internationalisation strategies where digital platforms replace physical

student exchanges (Critelli, et al., 2017). As discussed in more detail below, the project was conducted according to Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) principles (Guimarães & Finardi, 2021; Naicker, et al., 2021), which included ice breaker activities at the beginning of the project and reflection activities at the end of the project.

Methodologically, the paper may be described as a theory-driven *ex-post* personal reflection. In other words, the COIL project was designed and conducted as an integral part of a History and Theory of Graphic Design module taught on a third-year level, and not as a research project in its own right. This implies that no research hypotheses were formulated *ex ante* and then tested and evaluated in the course of the project, nor that the COIL assignment formed part of one or more plan-act-reflect cycles as typically employed in action research. Because research ethics clearance is never issued retrospectively, and the project was not screened by an ethics review committee prior to its implementation, this paper does not include any direct quotations or images that the participants contributed while interacting with each other, or while participating in the project in other ways.

As the students and lecturers who took part in the COIL assignment did not explicitly give their prior consent that any of the raw data[56] which accumulated in the course of the project may be published as part of scholarly research output, this paper stays at the level of a factual description of the main features of the project in general terms, and a personal reflective discussion of some of the issues which emerged. In addition, it is also important to point out that the theoretical concepts and principles which guided the collaboration that culminated in the project as it was eventually implemented are not the same as those which guide the ex-post discussion contained in this paper. Specifically, the negotiations with the international partners in Mexico and the United States of America, which occurred while we were busy exploring what type of joint project would be feasible, were based primarily on literature in the area of globally networked learning, and the scope and content of the assignment was informed by scholarly literature on COIL, as well as the input and advice of colleagues from other academic departments who shared their experiences with COIL in person. In contrast, the theoretical concepts from visual hermeneutics, as discussed in greater detail below, only entered the picture when the COIL project was already winding down, and the lecturers and students who had participated in it began with their own personal reflections.

The remainder of the paper covers a short description of the COIL assignment, which includes information about the level of study and courses at each participating institution, the main tasks that the students were asked to perform, as well as the learning outcomes which guided the activities. This is followed by a section that introduces visual hermeneutics and the notion of fusing horizons. The paper ends with a discussion about how the concept of fusing horizons applies to the phase of the COIL project during which the participating students met online with students from other countries to discuss the essay they had written about the work of a designer of their choice from the geographic region where their home university is located.

The collaborative online international learning (COIL) project

To elaborate on what was briefly mentioned above, one of the main advantages of the COIL approach is that it offers opportunities for "an alternative Thirdspace for promoting

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[56] Even though it would have been heuristically valuable to include a few screen grabs from some of the videos which were produced in the course of the COIL project in this paper, as well as a small selection of images taken from the student essays, this was not done because the participants did not explicitly give their consent for this to occur.

intercultural encounters in the internationalisation of higher education" (Guimarães & Finardi, 2021, p. 1) in contrast to the traditional forms of internationalisation, which include physical student and staff exchanges as well as other activities which fall into the broad category of Global Citizenship Education (Guimarães & Finardi, 2021). A key hurdle which needs to be overcome by a lecturer who would like to include a COIL assignment in a module offered at the lecturer's home university is to identify one or more suitable international partners and to negotiate a joint project with them successfully. In our case, we relied on the Virtual Partnering Fair organised by the COIL Center attached to the State University of New York (SUNY), where lecturers can post their contact details together with ideas for a joint project. After getting in touch with each other via email, online meetings and shared online folders, we eventually agreed to a project with graphic design students from the University of Monterrey (UDEM) in Mexico, the Rockland Community College (RCC), which is part of the SUNY university system in the United States of America, and the Durban University of Technology (DUT) in South Africa.

Even though the majority of students in the three groups were of a similar age (roughly 20 years of age, or in their early 20s), and all three groups were studying towards a career in the graphic arts, there were significant differences with regard to student numbers. At the University of Monterrey 18 students were enrolled for the subject Packaging Design, while there were only six students at the Rockland Community College pursuing the course Graphic Design. At the Durban University of Technology 32 students were enrolled for the subject History and Theory of Graphic Design 3. In the light thereof, we agreed to a COIL project that was five weeks in duration and during which we allocated the participating students to groups in such a manner that six of the groups consisted of three to four DUT students, two UDEM students and one RCC student, and three of the groups had three to four DUT students and two UDEM students. Another important difference was that the language of instruction is Spanish at UDEM (American) English at RCC and (South African) English at DUT. However, the level of English language proficiency of the UDEM students was adequate for the project to proceed.

We took the COIL course design principles as contained in Rubin (2015) and other training materials of the SUNY COIL Global Network into account when we formulated the following learning outcomes for the joint assignment: After completing the project, the participants will (a) have acquired a deeper understanding of diversity in the context of design practice, (b) be able to compare and evaluate examples of visual communication designs from different geographic regions, (c) be able to collaborate internationally, and (d) be able to reflect on individual experiences, discuss the personal and academic relevance of these experiences, and evaluate the success of the COIL project.

We ensured that the assignment topic was sufficiently general in nature so that each of the participating lecturers could integrate it into their own modules without difficulty. It is also important to point out that the assessments of the student's assignments were done by the lecturers at the student's home university, and due to this we did not include any assessment criteria, or an assessment rubric, in the jointly negotiated assignment brief. At the end of the project, a certificate was issued to all students who had completed all the activities of the COIL assignment, regardless of how their lecturers had assessed their work. The jointly agreed on assignment brief read as follows: For this project, you are required to identify one well-known designer (contemporary or from history) from your geographic region and an already completed visual communication design (including graphic art, animation, short film, print media design, packaging design, online advertisement, instructional illustration, among others) produced by this designer. Your assignment must discuss how the visual features of the design link with the visual culture of your geographic region.

We also suggested to the students that (a) they choose a design which will be of interest to someone from another country, (b) the key features of the chosen design should not be too simple, and also not too complex. Ideally, the visual communication design should be of such a nature that it is possible to comfortably talk about it for five to eight minutes, (c) a design which contains both visual images and text will in all likelihood be more suitable, but that any text which is not in the English language must be accompanied by an English translation, and (d) the chosen design can be historical in nature or current/recent, but it must be possible to access background information about the context in which it was produced without any difficulty. In addition, the students received written guidelines about online etiquette, ways of bridging language differences, information about working across different time zones, as well as practical guidelines for recording online meetings.

In line with the above-described envisaged learning outcomes, the COIL assignment comprised three activities, which closely link with the COIL course design principles discussed in Rubin (2015). The first activity involved getting to know the other students in the group. Each individual student was asked to upload a one-minute video of themselves into a shared folder, in which they introduce themselves to the others in their group (and all other participants as well), and each group was required to arrange an online meeting of the group, to video record this meeting, and to put a copy of the recording into a shared folder. During the first activity, the participating students were also asked to complete an ice-breaker exercise in which the students in each group were asked to share and compare the meanings of their first names and why these names were given. In addition, the lecturers uploaded short videos into a shared folder in which they introduced themselves to everyone else.

In the second activity, the students were required to upload an essay six to ten pages in length into a shared folder in which they discussed the chosen designer from their geographic region, and a design produced by this designer, as well as how the visual features of the design link with the visual culture of the applicable geographic region. After reading each other's submissions, the students met online with the others in their group (as a group), and further discussed and compared each other's work. Each individual student also had to answer a few questions on an activity sheet and upload this into the shared folder. The second online meeting of each group was intended to be similar to the question-and-answer session directly after a presentation at a scholarly conference. As was the case with Activity 1, the students were required to video record the online meeting of the group, and to place a copy of the recording into a shared folder.

In the third activity of the COIL assignment, each student was asked to upload a one-minute video of themselves in which the student reflects on the COIL experience. Each student was also asked to complete a short questionnaire about the COIL project on an individual basis, i. e. about what stood out, and how the process can be improved in future. Lastly, as was the case with the introduction videos, each lecturer uploaded a short video into the shared folder in which they reflected on their experiences.

Visual hermeneutics and the fusion of horizons

One of the main features of the COIL project was that the assignment required the participating students to interpret the visual meaning of their chosen design with reference to core aspects of the local visual culture. The brief referred to "the visual culture of your geographic region", which could be interpreted narrowly to the city of New York, Monterrey and Durban, or – more broadly – to visual signs and their social meaning associated with a particular province or linguistic region of the student's home country. More importantly, the assignment brief was formulated in such a way that the students were asked to share and

compare these visual meanings among each other, which in turn led to cultural exchange and the acquisition of a deeper understanding of diversity in the context of design practice through a process of international collaboration.

Due to the importance of visual interpretation in the COIL assignment, theoretical concepts, models and frameworks related to visual hermeneutics seemed an appropriate point of departure for a more systematic reflection on some its features. Visual hermeneutics may be defined in general terms as the processes of interpretation and validation as applied to visual statements (George, 2020). Closely associated terms are, firstly, figurative hermeneutics (Müller, 2012), which emphasises comparative seeing (the original term in the German language is *vergleichendes Sehen*), and, secondly, objective hermeneutics, where the attempt to reconstruct the logic according to which a text was originally compiled stands in the foreground (Kleemann, et al., 2009).

A seminal publication in the development of hermeneutic theory over the years was Gadamer's Truth and Method, which was first published in 1960 (Dockhorn & Brown, 1980). As discussed by Malpas (2018), Gadamer emphasises the role of prejudice and pre-judgment in the hermeneutic processes, and in his version of the hermeneutic circle "the circularity of interpretation is not simply a methodological principle but an essential feature of all knowledge and understanding" (Schwandt, 2007, p. 135). The main point here is that interpretations are not formed in isolation, but that knowledge and understanding come into being through a chain of events. Schwandt (2007, p. 135) essentially argues that in Gadamer's hermeneutic circle "all efforts to interpret (to understand) always take place within some background (for example, historical tradition, web of belief, and practice) that cannot be transcended" and that this inability to fully transcend the context-specific nature of the interpretation is an inherent, defining feature of all interpretive processes.

Gadamer's approach to hermeneutics includes the notion of a fusion of horizons, which refers to those aspects of interpretation and validation where "the horizons of understanding expand when people not only identify the way in which things from the past or from other people are different but also when they ask how they can be combined with or otherwise affect their current understanding. Their horizons partially fuse with those of the other"(Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014, p. 405). In other words, the process of a fusion of horizons implies that even if a listener (or viewer) disagrees with what is encountered, the "perception of the world changes, as does their understanding of themselves" (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014, p. 405). As pointed out by Mchunu (2021), the notion of fusing horizons closely relates to the term "included middle" as found in the literature on transdisciplinarity. The included middle has been discussed by several authors, but the most explicit definition of the term is by Ross & Mitchell (2018), who refer to it as "a process of integration allowing us to cross two different levels of reality or of perception and to integrate them effectively in both our thinking and being" (Mchunu, 2021, p. 31). Stated differently, a fusion of horizons occurs when a first interpretation merges with a second interpretation after the interpretant is faced with a new situation.

Discussion

When the above-outlined notion of fusion of horizons is integrated into reflections surrounding the latter part of the second activity of the COIL project, where the participating students were required to meet online with the other students in their group and to discuss each other's essays, then several issues emerge. First, it soon became clear that the students were enjoying the COIL project and that there was a very positive communicative atmosphere in all nine groups. However, in some of the groups, the students began the meeting with the

time-consuming process of presenting their essays to each other using the share screen function of the video meeting software (Zoom, Google Meet or MS Teams), even though this was not envisaged when we formulated the assignment requirements and activity sheets. It left little time at the end of the meeting for critical discussion. However, this does not necessarily mean that, while passively listening, shifts and adjustments to the interpretations of the visual meanings of the images they were discussing did not take place. As pointed out by Schwandt (2007, p. 135), "every interpretation relies on other interpretations" and the process of sharing and comparing how the visual designs link with selected aspects of the visual culture in Mexico, the United States of America or South Africa inevitably led to some sort of revised interpretation at the level of each individual student.

Second, the video recordings of the group discussions show that in all nine groups the students were initially pre-occupied with collecting the information they needed to complete the activity sheet for Activity 2, which asked the students to answer the following questions: (a) compile a list of which members of your group discussed which designers and which designs or artworks, (b) what are the unique visual features of the design in each case? (c) which aspects of the design link it to a particular geographic region (for example, culture-specific references, local icons, among others)? and (d) is there anything which stood out for you? Questions (b) and (c) involved articulating the main visual meaning of the designs by isolating a small selection of key visual elements and then discussing the social meaning of these elements in the context of a clearly defined geographic region. These questions did not, however, specifically require the students to indicate whether their visual interpretations before, during and after the group meeting changed in any way, especially regarding the work of the designer they themselves presented to the group.

Third, in all nine COIL groups the discussions eventually drifted towards how similarities in visual meanings can exist across cultures. For example, in one of the groups the students ended up comparing two political cartoons at length. One of the students in the group had presented a cartoon from South Africa, which was followed by a student from UDEM who presented and analysed a political cartoon from Mexico, albeit from a different time period. In both cases, the graphic artists commented on the social issues of crime and corruption in a visually engaging, witty manner. In the course of the discussion, the South African students benefitted from the local knowledge of the UDEM students about Mexican history, and their familiarity with the political debates the cartoon by the engraver and cartoonist Manuel Manilla was referring to. In the same way, the Mexican students relied on the South African students to briefly orientate them about the underlying issues in South Africa's political landscape the cartoon by Jonathan Shapiro, also known as Zapiro, was based on. This was a good example of how "the horizons of understanding expand when people not only identify the way in which things from the past or from other people are different but also when they ask how they can be combined with or otherwise affect their current understanding" (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014, p. 405).

Fourth, it initially appeared that the notion of fusing horizons was directly relevant to the COIL project primarily because each student's first interpretation of how the visual features of their chosen design link with the visual culture of the geographic region at the beginning of the project fused with a second interpretation at the end of the project after having encountered the new situation of interacting digitally with graphic design students from another country. However, the actual state of affairs was more complex than that. This was because there was also a significant degree of diversity within the participating students from New York, Monterrey and Durban. For example, the group of students from New York included an exchange student from Brazil, who spoke about the visual culture of the eastern coast of North America from the perspective of an outsider. The group of students from Monterrey included a participant who was born in Syria and had only recently moved from Syria to Mexico with

her parents. There was also a high level of diversity with regard to home language, ethnic background, religious affiliation, among others, within the group of students from Durban. This meant that the student's horizons of understanding did not necessarily expand in the course of the COIL project because they interacted with another graphic design student from another country, but also because the COIL assignment indirectly facilitated a more subtle type of cultural exchange among the students at the same university.

Conclusion

The above discussion suggests that theoretical concepts from the scholarly literature on hermeneutics, such as the concept of fusing horizons of knowledge, are sufficiently flexible in nature to apply to a visual communication design setting and to guide reflections about the type of COIL project discussed in this paper. Seen as a whole, the main learning outcome of the COIL project, i. e. that the participants would acquire a deeper understanding of diversity in the context of design practice through a process of international collaboration, were successfully met. The project also illustrated how collaborative online spaces can be transformative for all involved, especially in the context of the global COVID-19 pandemic, where online international collaboration proved to be an effective way of reducing the sense of isolation which inevitably accompanies curfews and other restrictions related to COVID-19 pandemic related lockdowns.

In a broader sense, the type of online international collaboration between design students discussed in this paper also links with research that deals with how the core elements of the 4IR impact on higher education. Stated differently, the present paper touches on issues relating to collaboration, fusion of horizons, digital platforms replacing physical student exchanges and transdiciplinarity which, taken together, closely relate to the way in which the advancing 4IR is changing higher education. Specifically, the impact of the 4IR on higher education has been described by Blaschke & Hase (2015) as a move from a higher education pedagogy to a higher education heutagogy. Heutagogy emphasises learner agency, self-efficacy, metacognition and reflection, as well as non-linear learning (Blaschke & Hase, 2015). This paper therefore contributes to 4IR education as it discusses the metacognition and reflection dimension of the heutagogic approach in a design education setting.

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