The Importance of Teaching Cultural Awareness in Design Education: Evidence from Interior Design

By Amy Roehl Mfa, Shweta Reddy-Linga, Jane Kucko & Laura Prestwood

Texas Christian University, United States

Abstract - This article presents findings from a higher education interior design course at a U.S. university. For the course, titled the "Heritage Studio," a series of projects were developed aimed at developing self-awareness, empathy and cultural awareness in the students. Research and documentation of individual students' family histories provided the foundation for the projects. Throughout the process of completing projects for the course, students were encouraged to become self-aware of their personal heritage (cultural, linguistic, religious etc.) as a pathway toward developing empathy and appreciation for the personal history of their classmates. Upon completion of the course, student feedback was collected. Responses were qualitatively analyzed to assess students' learning of cultural awareness. The four themes that emerged as a result were: (1) realization of family impact on personal development, (2) realization of past affecting present (3) increased awareness of both diversity and commonalities among classmates and, (4) increased respect for one's own relatives and for the personal history of others. Details of these findings are described in this paper.

Keywords : self-awareness, cultural awareness, heritage, interior design, design education.

GJHSS-G Classification : FOR Code: 930299p,

THE IMPORTANCE OF TEACHING CULTURAL AWARENESS IN DESIGN EDUCATION EVIDENCE FROM INTERIOR DESIGN

Strictly as per the compliance and regulations of:

The Importance of Teaching Cultural Awareness in Design Education: Evidence from Interior Design

Amy Roehl Mfa [α], Shweta Reddy-Linga [σ], Jane Kucko [ρ] & Laura Prestwood [ω]

Abstract - This article presents findings from a higher education interior design course at a U.S. university. For the course, titled the "Heritage Studio," a series of projects were developed aimed at developing self-awareness, empathy and cultural awareness in the students. Research and documentation of individual students' family histories provided the foundation for the projects. Throughout the process of completing projects for the course, students were encouraged to become self-aware of their personal heritage (cultural, linguistic, religious etc.) as a pathway toward developing empathy and appreciation for the personal history of their classmates. Upon completion of the course, student feedback was collected. Responses were qualitatively analyzed to assess students' learning of cultural awareness. The four themes that emerged as a result were: (1) realization of family impact on personal development, (2) realization of past affecting present (3) increased awareness of both diversity and commonalities among classmates and, (4) increased respect for one's own relatives and for the personal history of others. Details of these findings are described in this paper.

Keywords : self-awareness, cultural awareness, heritage, interior design, design education.

I. Introduction

a) A Global Society

With the change from an internet that allowed users to view content ("Web 1.0") to a platform that enabled complete interactivity of users ("Web 2.0") (O'Reilly, 2005) came a massive shift in the way that people communicate and interact around the globe. Prior to this shift, knowledge of cultures beyond one's own may have been considered a privilege accessible only to those who had the desire and means to travel. Today, intercultural awareness is a necessity for effectively navigating both home and work life. Younger generations are expected to connect and work effectively with individuals from different parts of the world, making awareness of other cultures an essential competency. In addition, there are many benefits to a world that embraces diversity. As James Neulip, professor of Communication and Media Studies at St. Norbert College points out, societies that value diversity enjoy "healthier communities; increased international, national and local commerce; reduced conflict and

personal growth through increased tolerance" (2012, p. 4).

Students graduating today enter a workplace and world that requires individuals to be culturally aware. "Cultural awareness refers to the developing consciousness of culture and the ways in which culture shapes values and beliefs" (Burchum, 2002, p.7). According to Burchum, cultural awareness begins with understanding the influences of one's own culture. Cultural awareness is demonstrated when an individual recognizes his or her personal heritage, beliefs, and values in order to identify with others whose beliefs and values are also shaped by their heritage. This awareness allows one to see similarities and differences of culture and its influence on various aspects an individual's life. The value for cultural awareness increases as rapidly shifting conditions affect ways that people around the globe communicate and interact.

Factors influencing the need for cultural awareness in contemporary society include: (i) increasingly diverse local societies as a result of growth in immigrant populations ("A nation of immigrants", 2013), (ii) the transient nature of contemporary work: individuals and families relocate, often across continents for employment opportunities, (iii) ease and speed of travel for both personal and business reasons, and (iv) real-time communication enabled by new technologies that facilitate interactions with people in varied physical locations and time zones. With these emerging conditions in mind, undergraduates today must prepare for a world that demands heightened sensitivity toward cultural nuances (Deardorff, de Wit & Heyl, 2012). As a result, higher education institutions in the U.S. actively encourage the development of courses with content that includes global awareness and internationalization (Green, 2012).

Therefore, the purpose of this article is to present an example of an interior design course that was developed with the primary objective of teaching cultural awareness to undergraduate students majoring in Interior Design. While the focus of the course studied and described in this article is interior design, the study's outcomes may be applied to other disciplines involving the design of the built environment such as architecture and engineering. This project lends itself to interdisciplinary approaches where students from

Authors α σ ρ ω : Associate Professor and Chair of Interior Design and Director of the Center for Lighting Education.
E-mail : a.dahm@tcu.edu

history, psychology, language and material culture studies could be integrated. The course outline includes a series of three consecutive projects that placed emphasis upon the individual investigating their personal heritage. Upon completion of the projects student feedback was collected to assess whether the objective of developing cultural awareness was fulfilled. The student responses to open-ended questions have been presented as evidence supporting the success of this course in imparting cultural awareness.

II. Context of Study

A series of projects were developed for an interior design studio course taught during the 2nd year of a 4-year undergraduate program with the intention of developing empathy and cultural awareness alongside the subject-specific content. Started in 2008, the "Heritage Studio" has run for 6 consecutive years, engaging a total of 81 students. These interior design projects were developed to teach self-awareness, empathy, cultural awareness and ultimately a global view. Fig. 1 is a diagrammatic representation of the aspects of student consciousness expected to develop as students worked towards completion the series of projects.

Course described, learning outcomes of (i) interconnectedness, (2) knowledge of cross cultures, and (iii) self-awareness were included in desired learning outcomes.

III. Teaching Methodology

a) Use of Storytelling and Reflection

The approach to learning in this course is student-centered. Learning through personal discovery was an important part of this class. Therefore a methodology that focused upon personal research, reflection and storytelling was selected.

Fig.1 : Shift in student consciousness from self-awareness toward a global view

Specific to the discipline of interior design, learning outcomes of the course need to comply with the Council for Interior Design Accreditation (CIDA). CIDA is the accrediting organization for college and university level interior design programs in the United States and Canada (CIDA). CIDA (2009) requires that interior design programs expose students to "globalization and implications of conducting the practice of design within a world market." Program graduates are expected to enter the marketplace as entry-level designers who "have a global view and weigh design decisions within the parameters of cultural contexts." Thus, CIDA guidelines require interior design programs to provide students with opportunities that allow them to gain knowledge of other cultures.

Cultural awareness is a priority of the Mission, Vision and Values and Global Awareness components of the core curriculum required of all students at the university (TCU, 2004). For the purposes of the Across a range of disciplines, storytelling is recognized as "a means of making sense of experience" (Alterio & McDrury, 2004, p. 7).

Within the "reflective paradigm", storytelling has become an accepted learning tool for increased connection between learner and material. "We define reflective learning as a process which involves dialogue with others for improvement or transformation whilst recognizing the emotional, social and political context of the learner" (Brock bank, McGill, & Beech, 2002 p. 3) in student-centered, learning-centered instruction, storytelling allows the participant to analyze and come to conclusions about themselves and other participants. This allows the student to use their frame of reference as a starting point for understanding others and in turn, expands the student's ways of knowing.

Knowledge comes through one's own experience and the shared experiences of classmates. The teaching and learning strategy for this course utilized student-generated research followed by storytelling, then personal and group reflection. This method engaged students to become aware of self and others as a path toward cultural awareness. Storytelling (visual, written and audio forms) provided a powerful vehicle for students to create deep connections to their own past as well as to the personal histories of their classmates and is key to the success of the projects described.

IV. Course Description

a) The Heritage Studio

For the purposes of this paper, the term "studio" is used to describe both a physical setting and a type of course. In the U.S., interior design and architectural courses in which students focus on project-based learning are called "studio" courses. In school, students do not typically work with clients, thus the projects are hypothetical in nature. The physical space in which students produce these projects is also referred to as a 'studio'. The layout of a studio is typically open, without physical barriers, to encourage collaboration and sharing of information and ideas.

The "Heritage Studio" was named as such because it addresses interior design studies through a cultural heritage lens. As a part of the 'Heritage Studio" three consecutive projects are assigned and completed during the course of a 15-week long semester. Each project builds upon the themes and ideas established in the previous project. Projects progressively increase in size and scope. The first project is very personal, focusing on the individual student's family history. The subsequent projects move toward designing a fully public space for multiple end-users. By starting with a personal story, the intention is to create a stronger connection between student and hypothetical client. A more in-depth description of each of the three projects is provided below.

The Heritage Studio course, a requirement of the interior design curriculum, takes place in the spring semester of the second year. From 2008 to 2012, 81 students (approximately 15 students per semester) have enrolled in the course. The design process, integral to studio-based learning, is used to explore issues of personal and collective identity. In addition to cultivating design and technology skills, learning objectives for the course include:

1. **Interconnectedness:**

Acknowledge and celebrate the collective history of our class.

2. **Knowledge of Cross-Cultures:**

Create an appreciation for our richly diverse backgrounds. Foster cultural awareness through shared reflection of our unique histories.

3. **Self-Awareness:**

Activate empathy for others
Be respectful of each person's viewpoint and stories

During the semester, students were required to complete all three design projects: the Heritage Collage (2 weeks), the Heritage Pavilion (4 weeks), and the design of a cultural center for the university campus (9 weeks). Each project establishes the foundation for the next. All projects are hypothetical. Design solutions are communicated through representations of the project using floorplans, 3-dimensional computer-generated renderings, and physical models.

V. PROJECT DESCRIPTIONS

Project 1 : The Heritage Collage – Expression Of A Personal Story

The first project, the Heritage Collage, is very personal, a visual manifestation of the student's own story. Students are required to tell a story about their heritage through a visual photomontage made using Adobe Photoshop software. Desired learning outcomes related to interior design include the ability to communicate in a visual format and an introduction to Adobe Photoshop, standard software used across the industry.

Students begin the project by researching their own heritage. To start, information is gathered through interviews with family members and searching online databases such as Ellis Island and www.ancestry.com. Students share their stories with the class using visual artifacts including photographs, diaries, letters, and objects. Classmates respond to the range of possibilities presented, helping the storyteller narrow down the narrative most significant to the individual. Students are required to write their story, then create a collage to express the written story. Multiple renditions of the collages are shared and reflected upon as a group. Classmates suggest how to make the visual story most effectively communicate the written story. This project is important for the student to become aware of the history that has made them who they are, to realize that they are not separated from their history or from the history of their ancestors.

Project 2 : The Heritage Pavilion – The Personal Story Placed In A Public Setting

In this project title the term "pavilion" is used to describe a free-standing structure or "mini" piece of architecture. Students are charged with taking the personal story established in the collage and placing it in a public setting. This is to
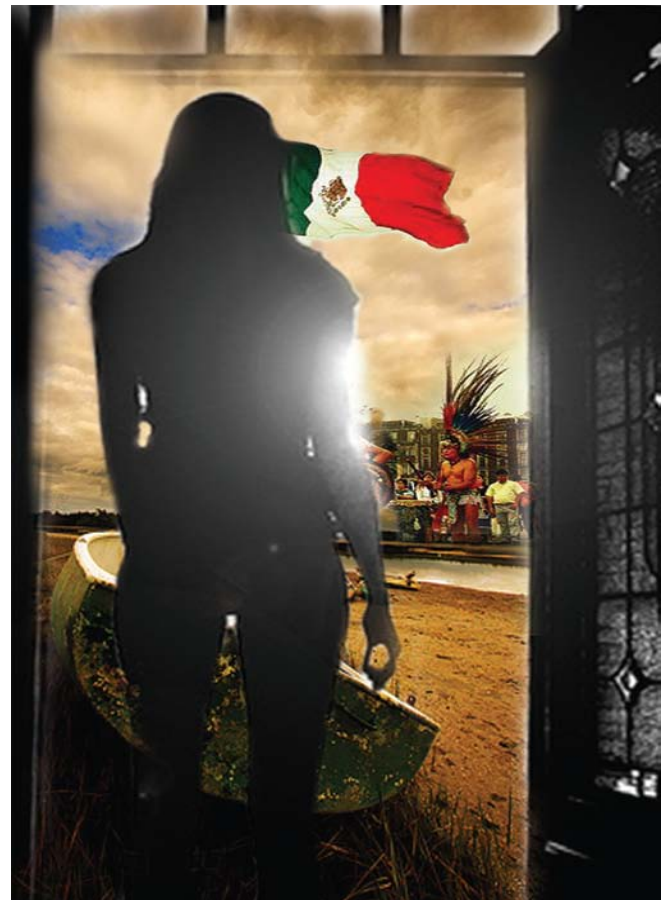

Fig.2 : Example of the heritage collage titled "Opening Doors" by Natalie Salinas

a) Student Description of Their Story

"All of my life, my heritage has been something that I felt detached from. My father is Mexican and my mom is of Irish decent. People doubt my claim when I say that I'm half Mexican. My last name and dark hair are the only traits that resemble what society sees as Mexican. To add to my failure to look Mexican, my parents separated when I was young, resulting in a distant relationship with my dad's side of the family. I eventually realized that if I dropped my last name when introducing myself to new people I could avoid questions that I had come to resent. I turned away from my father's roots, denying myself the lessons to be learned from the struggles his family faced in order to create a life in the United States. In the process of researching for this project, I have become enlightened. The little parts of my past that I never fully appreciated and at times have felt embarrassed about have presented themselves in a new light. I experienced a rush of appreciation for the struggles that my ancestors have gone through. I now try to look past the negative images I've held of illegal immigrants in order to see the rich and colorful culture that I should be proud to come from."

Be achieved by expressing the story as a 3-dimensional site-specific structure. Each student selects a space for his or her installation at a local art museum.

As students design their pavilion, they must consider how their structure will interact with the architecture of the building just as any interior project would engage with the architectural "shell" or existing building conditions. The goal of the project is to provide museum guests an experience of each student's personal story as the visitor moves through the pavilion. This project merges public and private, exposing the story to a wider audience. The 2-dimensional expression of the story established in the collage is displayed in 3-dimensional form inviting the public to engage with and experience each student's personal story.

Learning outcomes specific to the discipline of interior design expand with this project. Students learn to develop an architectural language, the forms that an interior designer creates to express 3-dimensional space. Students are exposed to issues of site and context and must consider how their proposal will fit into the existing conditions. Google SketchUp, the software used to communicate the pavilion design is an industry standard for used to create 3-dimensional sketch studies. Employers in the U.S. expect that graduates are proficient in this software upon entering employment.
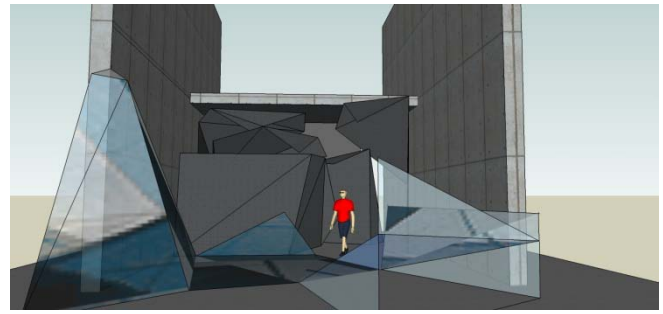

Fig.3 : Example of the Heritage Pavilion titled "Journey to Reflection" by Natalie Salinas

b) Student Description of their Pavilion

"The inspiration for this installation comes from my own feelings about my personal heritage. The entrance to the pavilion starts off very dark to represent my own uncertainty about my roots. The steel structure is designed to feel enclosed and cold to reflect my distant feelings toward my cultural identity. Upon turning the corner, the visitor is faced with angled mirrors that force them to see themselves from all sides. The path ends on a raised platform overlooking the museum's lake where the visitor may rest and reflect."

Project 3 : The Heritage Center – A Fully Public Project

The third project involves the design of a cultural center to be located on the university campus. The center's purpose is to provide a venue for active intercultural learning for both the university and wider community. Collectively, the class determines the project brief. The brief includes an outline of activities with corresponding space typologies to be incorporated into the center. Students consider the types of activities that would best encourage learning about other cultures and work through the following questions to arrive at their final brief as a class:

a. What kinds of spaces would encourage people to want to come to the center and linger?

b. How to create interior design that is welcoming and that encourages involvement of visitors?

c. Consider a broad range of learning activities that could occur in the center. How will the design of the interior be flexible to support these varied activities?

Once the class agrees upon the brief, each student begins their individual design for the center. Sensitivity toward diverse end-users is essential. Creating a space that welcomes and engages a wide variety of users without alienating others or showing preference to specific users is a design challenge that must be addressed. Each solution has a unique identity. Spaces are interpreted and developed with a concept generated by the individual student. Lessons learned from their personal story and the stories of classmates are applied to the design of the center, but ultimately students must step out of their personal story and consider the needs of a wide variety of users.

For this project students learn to create a floorplan. This portion of the project takes significant time as the students work through to-scale prototypical drawings for each space typology such as an interactive kitchen, art studio, café and multi-purpose room. Students learn about and apply anthropometrics to their space planning to insure that distances are correct and spaces are usable for human beings. U.S. commercial building codes are applied as well as Americans with Disabilities standards that insure all public spaces are accessible to people with varied abilities.

Fig. 4 : Example of the heritage center titled "Universal Solutions Heritage Center" by Natalie Salinas

c) *Student Description of their Heritage Center*

"Everyone can claim ownership to their personal heritage but visitors might come to the Universal Solutions Heritage Center with little knowledge of cultures outside their own. The goal of the center is to unlock the secrets of all cultures in order to gain better understanding an appreciation of others. I used the metaphor found in the "Rubick's Cube", a 3-dimensional puzzle game to develop the interior design for the center. Spaces may rotate and change just as our understanding for culture does during our personal enlightenment process."

VI. Methodology

a) *Assessment of Student Learning*

At the end of the semester upon completion of their third and final project a survey was distributed to the students enrolled in the class. Students completed open-ended questions after making their final presentation in class. To insure anonymity, during the first three years of the course, the surveys were filled out by hand and collected in an envelope. The last three years of the project the responses were collected digitally through an online survey tool. In each questionnaire there were a total of seven open-ended questions to be answered in essay format. The number of respondents who completed the survey was 78 over a course of six years.

The responses were qualitative in nature and thus data was analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis was most suited for this study as it is a data driven methodology that allows for consistent patterns to emerge from the responses. The steps utilized in the current study to analyze the qualitative data were based on Braun & Clarke (2006) recommendations: (1) responses from all respondents were collated for each question; (2) all responses were then reviewed by two researchers and preliminary coding was performed; (3) based on the preliminary coding each of the responses were then reviewed by two researchers to segregate them into themes that emerged from the data; (4) to maintain reliability and to ensure that the meaning and the patterns observed were appropriate, the responses were read multiple times by each coders; (5) finally all the themes were reviewed to verify if data was represented accurately under the current themes identified and the themes that did not have sufficient data to support were eliminated; (6) once the themes were finalized, each of the themes were named and defined.

VII. Results

The primary themes that emerged from the qualitative data analysis were:
1. Realization of family impact on personal development
2. Realization of past affecting present.
3. Increased awareness of both diversity and commonalities among classmates.
4. Increased respect for one's own relatives and for the personal history of others.

a) *Realization of Family Impact on Personal Development*

Heritage impacts an individual's social and psychological development. Experiences within a family lay the groundwork and foundation for individual growth and maturity. Student responses revealed an increased awareness of the influence of one's upbringing on their personhood. Students demonstrated a realization of their family's distinctive characteristics and nuances. A deeper understanding of the influence of family members (past and present) upon how he or she had been raised was described. Recognition of one's own heritage and its impact is clearly revealed in the following student responses:

"Before I did not think about heritage as an influence in my life, but now I see how it connects to everything I do and how I behave."

"Even those who are adopted grow up with distinct cultural variations based on the people who raised them."

"I have a better understanding of why I am the person I am today. It is because of the people who raised me and their past experiences."

b) Realization of Past Affecting Present

For many students, the project process changed their perception of the concept of 'heritage.' Students became aware of many influences in their lives that went beyond their immediate family. Many students previously viewed the concept of 'heritage' as something that happened in the past. Towards the end of the semester students demonstrated a new understanding of how experiences and decisions of their ancestors impacted their lives. As students discovered the context of their place within their family's history it enabled them to view themselves as a part of a continuum that includes past, present, and future. Student responses indicate a realization of events experienced and decisions made by individuals in prior generations had an effect on the student's social situation in the present. The following responses indicate the realization that decisions an individual makes during the course of a lifetime affects generations to come:

"I realize how truly complex our heritage is. Any little change anywhere along my family tree could have changed everything."

"I learned what it actually means to have a complete family beyond just your parents and brothers and sisters. Coming to understand the generations of people before you that are a part of who you are even if they were not physically present in your life – they were present by way of your immediate family who learned from them."

"I now look at heritage with a more holistic perspective, including past, present and future."

c) Increased Awareness of Both Diversity and Commonalities among Classmates

During the process of completing each component of the heritage projects, students consistently demonstrated a new awareness of diversity among classmates. Students also expressed an increased awareness of commonalities between classmates. The following responses are examples of appreciation for the differences among people and that they have more in common with each other than they had previously considered:

"Listening to others made me understand everyone more. As a class we have grown closer. It was interesting to see that even though we are from such different backgrounds, we are similar in so many ways."

"I value how different cultures coexist. I think it's really neat that though people may be very different they can still coexist and work well together."

"These projects make me think about how different we all are, yet we all mesh and work so well together. It made me realize, culturally, that so many different backgrounds and personalities can meet and connect."

d) Increased Respect for One's Own Relatives and for the Personal History of Others

Students found other people's stories to be inspirational. During the early stages of the projects some students seemed to think that they did not have anything special to tell about themselves. Toward the completion of the projects, these students indicated a new appreciation for their heritage because it made them unique. New connections were created between students when students identified similar themes running through several classmates' backgrounds. The following responses indicate a deeper understanding of one's heritage:

"We are inseparable from our heritage. Heritage is not a choice. Even if you want to, you cannot disconnect from your heritage. It is part of who you are."

"Heritage is more than the people who came before you. Our heritage is what makes us who we are and we are a part of our heritage."

"Heritage is something that continually impacts everyone. It plays a large part in what makes a person."

VIII.   Conclusion

Today the global workplace requires college graduates to learn other cultures including elevated sensitivity towards cultural nuances. Pedagogy that integrates student- and learning-centered instruction allows students to first explore their own cultural heritage as a basis in which to learn about others. Self-awareness, empathy, an appreciation for richly diverse backgrounds enhance intercultural knowledge.

Projects that progress from discovery of one's personal cultural heritage to application of cultural values and beliefs increase student's intercultural knowledge. Based upon the results of this study, students elevated their knowledge of the impact of generations of one's own family upon their personal development and the personal history and cultures of others.

While this study focused upon studio-based instruction in interior design, the three-project series can be applied to other fields in the built environment such as architecture, engineering, and design thinking. Learning outcomes such as dealing with site conditions and context, human beings in relation to space and structure, as well as creative development of architectural form could be applied across a variety of disciplines. Future research could explore whether or not expanding to interdisciplinary teams (history, psychology, history and material cultures and language students) impacts intercultural learning.

References Références Referencias

1. A nation of immigrants. (January 29, 2013). Retrieved August 31, 2013, from http://www.pewhispanic.org/2013/01/29/a-nation-ofimmigrants/

2. Alterio, M., & McDrury, J. (2004). Learning Through Storytelling in Higher Education: Using Reflection and Experience to Improve Learning. Routledge.

3. Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3(2), 77-101.

4. Brockbank, A., McGill, I., & Beech, N. (Eds.). (2002). Reflective Learning in Practice. Aldershot, Hampshire, England: Gower Publishing Limited.

5. Burchum, J. (2002). Cultural competence: An evolutionary perspective. Nursing Forum, 37(4), 5-15.

6. Council for Interior Design Accreditation (CIDA, 2009). Accreditation standards. Retrieved from http: //www.accredit-id.org/ profstandards.php

7. Council for Interior Design Accreditation website. Retrieved on September 8, 2013 from http:// accredit-id.org/about/

8. Deardorff, D., de Wit, H., & Heyl, J. (2012). Bridges to the future: The global landscape of international higher education. In D. Deardorff, H. Wit, J. Heyl, & T. Adams (Eds.), The SAGE handbook of international higher education. (pp. 457-487). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.

9. Green, M. F. (2012). Global citizenship: What are we talking about and why does it matter? Trends and Insights for International Education Leaders, 1-3.

10. Neulip, J. (2012). Intercultural Communication: A Contextual Approach. U.S.A.: SAGE Publications, Inc.

11. O'Reilly, T. (2005). What is Web 2.0: Design Patterns and Business Models for the Next Generation of Software? O'Reilly. Retrieved from: http:// oreilly. com/web2/archive/what-is-web-20.html

12. Texas Christian University. (2004). TCU Core Curriculum. retrieved from: http://www.core.tcu.edu/