

Graphic Design as a Medium to Enhance Students' Knowledge of Malaysian Cultural Art Forms

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ABSTRACT

The principles of graphic design are pertinent in graphic design education, ensuring students are well equipped with the knowledge that guides them to produce sound design work. While abiding to these principles when producing graphic works, it is just as important for students to understand their knowledge of local art forms. Through the researcher's experience, she has found that much of the students' graphic work lack local art forms in their content. As a communication medium between the researcher (lecturer) and the students, graphic design education hence became the platform for students to learn about Malaysian cultural art forms (MCAF). Using a case study action research approach, underpinned by some Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) principles, the research explored a group of 20 graphic design students' initial understanding of their knowledge of Malaysian cultural art forms (MCAF). Then intervention activities that incorporated MCAF in the Malaysian graphic design class were implemented after which the students initial understanding of their knowledge in MCAF were determined. In Cycle 1, the researcher conducted a focus group interview and administered questionnaires to gauge students' initial understanding of MCAF. In Cycle 2 intervention activities were incorporated into the classroom learning. The interventions were, a visit to a contemporary Malaysian art exhibition; participation in a batik workshop; a visit and hands-on experience making some craft work at a Mah Meri cultural village, and attending a talk about wayang kulit, as well as viewing some wayang kulit exhibits. Upon the completion of each activity, the students had to answer a questionnaire with regards to their learning and understanding of each of the MCAF. A focus group interview was conducted at Cycle 3 for triangulation of data. Findings show that the students did not have much knowledge nor understanding of MCAF before participating in the intervention activities. However, the students' knowledge appeared enhanced after participating in the intervention activities.

KEYWORDS: Graphic design education, Cultural art forms, Culturally responsive teaching, Communication

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Introduction

Culture is a very unique term when it comes to Malaysia. At the first glance of her capital city, Kuala Lumpur, one may get the impression that this country is mainly filled with Western modernity, from its infrastructure to most city folks' dressing and the widely spoken language of English. It is apparent that Malaysia is globalised. However, through closer observation, one will also discover that there is a mix of ethnic cultures, such as Chinese, Indian, Malay and various other ethnic groups.

Cultural art forms, such as woodcarving, weaving and wickerwork are among the many kinds found in Malaysia. Having the diversity in ethnic cultures and sharing a common globalised culture is indeed a unique phenomenon in Malaysia. The cultural identity that Malaysians have is not only formed by their individual ethnic backgrounds or origins but also a national one. For a Malaysian graphic design student, the abovementioned is ideal to set the ground for a rich exploration of cultural art forms. As such, graphic design education is one medium where lecturers can communicate with students regarding learning about Malaysian cultural art forms (MCAF).

Graphic design education has its roots in the teachings of the Bauhaus, a German school that was first started in 1919 in Germany. The curriculum of the Bauhaus included practical, theory and workshops that taught students many key areas pertaining to art and design. Throughout the decades, many private tertiary education institutions have emerged in Malaysia, offering graphic

design courses. All these courses are reflective of the original curriculum set by the Bauhaus. While the curriculum is effective in imparting fundamental and necessary graphic design knowledge to students, local cultural art forms are often excluded or not focused on.

From the experience of the researcher as a graphic design educator, she had noticed that local cultural art forms are not much explored by Malaysian graphic design students. Having the knowledge and understanding of one's own cultural art forms is important for a graphic designer because the core duty of a designer is to communicate through visual and text to a selected target audience (clients) (Hollis, 2001). With good knowledge and understanding of local cultural art forms that are common to the local target audience, a graphic designer will be able to manipulate those art forms into effective visuals that convey messages successfully. No doubt that in today's globalising Malaysia, many clients may not be Malaysians but nevertheless, having the knowledge and understanding regarding one's own cultural art forms will enrich a graphic designer's sense of self and community (Stultz, 2006; Marshall, 2007; Khoury & Khoury, 2009; Hamdy, 2010; Hadjiyanni, 2014).

This study involved 20 graphic design students of a graphic communication design programme of a selected local private university. The selection of the group is due to the natural setting of the research, which in this case is the intact class. Most of the students in the class were Malaysians, taking a design studies module in the programme.

The sample group, under the tutelage of the researcher, were in their first semester and first year of the programme. While the majority of the group had basic knowledge in design learned from the previous Foundation year that they had completed, the remainder came from other non-art related programmes. The duration of the research was one academic semester. The research set out to first find out the initial understanding of the selected group of graphic design students in their knowledge of four selected Malaysian cultural art forms (MCAF); the possible reasons that led to the students' initial understanding; the types of intervention activities incorporating the four selected MCAF in a graphic design classroom; and the students' understanding in their knowledge of those MCAF after participating in the intervention activities.

Four MCAF, namely contemporary Malaysian art (Fig. 1) batik (Fig. 2), wayang kulit (Fig. 3), Mah Meri masks (Fig. 4) were chosen to be included in the pedagogy of a

graphic design classroom. These particular MCAF were selected because of their individuality and original historical paths, that they came from various cultures and what has become of them today is the result of assimilation of cultures in Malaysia. Besides that, these cultural art forms also relate to the multicultural setting of Malaysia, reflecting one of the three principles in the National Culture Policy that states, "Suitable elements of the other culture [sic] may be accepted as part of the national culture." (National Culture Policy | JKNN, 2016). The national culture of Malaysia is one that is diverse because of her multiculturalism. The graphic design students' understanding of local cultural art forms is therefore an interesting aspect that was explored in this study. The four MCAF were selected also partly due to the accessibility to venues for workshops, exhibitions and talks. Easy access to cultural venues creates opportunities for students to learn about culture (EACEA, 2008).

Figure 1: Contemporary Malaysian art.



Figure 2: Malaysian batik.



Source: Sebastian, L. (April 6, 2013) *Batik 044*. [Digital photograph]. Retrieved from <https://www.flickr.com/photos/137269534@N06/39469283364>

Figure 3: Two wayang kulit puppets.



Figure 4: A Mah Meri mask.



The Study

In order to expand students' intellectual horizon and academic achievement, teachers ought to have the knowledge to utilise culture to scaffold the students' learning, through the students' own culture and experience, valuing and recognising their own culture (Gay, 2002). According to Ladson-Billings (1994), Cultural Responsive Teaching (CRT) revolves around a pedagogy that places high importance on students' cultural references in various aspects of their study. The core of learning is culture, which shapes the processes of a community or an individual (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Bruner, 1996). For graphic design education in a multicultural country like Malaysia, where there is a diversity of ethnic groups, CRT is a suitable approach

because it encourages students to learn more and discover about their own cultures, utilises students' identities and backgrounds as meaningful sources for creating optimal learning environments and share with peers from different cultures (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Nieto, 2000). Each Malaysian cultural art form (MCAF) that the students were exposed to in the intervention activities are design representation of the concepts of culture. These MCAF were selected due to the uniqueness in their visual and contextual qualities. Since graphic design students primarily work with visuals and materials (Armstrong, 2009; NCERT, 2011; Wagner & Watch, 2017), batik's form of printmaking, wayang kulit puppets' forms and shapes, contemporary Malaysian art's variety of styles and Mah Meri's traditional

use of natural materials such as wood and leaves would serve as a suitable start for the students' acquisition of knowledge and understanding of MCAF.

CRT involves teachers working together with students in class room activities that utilise and are engaged in cultural products such as art, leading students to explore their cultural diversity and cultural identities (Lee, 2012). The principles of CRT are (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Brown University's The Knowledge Loom: Educators Sharing and Learning Together, 2008):

- 1) **Communication of high expectations** refers to frequent messages from the teachers and the school that students will succeed. This is derived from genuine trust and belief that the students have the capabilities to learn well. This builds confidence in students when they are not stereotyped.
- 2) **Active teaching methods** sees to students playing the active role in learning through crafting curriculum and developing learning activities. Ownership is formed from this kind of instructional design which can result in more engagement with lifelong learning.
- 3) **Teacher as the facilitator** - the role of the teacher is to facilitate students' learning through instructing, guiding, mediating, and consulting of knowledge. While students are learning, teachers act as navigators that steer them to directions relevant to their learning.
- 4) **Positive perspectives on parents and family, students, parents and**

community members - participating in conversations involving issues that are important to them. Issues in classroom curriculum and activities are also included in these discussions. This creates inclusion of all stakeholders when it comes to incorporating cultural aspects in the teaching and learning scene.

- 5) **Cultural sensitivity** - teachers gaining knowledge of the various cultures in their classrooms and include them into the design of classroom instructions. With the inclusion of cultures in classroom instructions, the teaching and learning will be more relevant to the stakeholders.
- 6) **Reshaping the curriculum** means that the curriculum is reshaped to suit the cultures where students came from. To reshape a curriculum in this regard means being responsive to the cultural settings of the society and how learning can take place with reference to that real world.
- 7) **Culturally mediated instruction** refers to instructions embedded in the curriculum content that consist of cognition interceded by culture, social settings that are culturally accepted for learning, and knowledge that carries cultural values.
- 8) **Student-controlled classroom discourse** - some parts of the lesson will be placed in the students' charge. This will enable teachers to gauge the students' way of communication learned from their home and community.
- 9) **Small group instruction and academically-related discourse** focuses on

organising instruction in groups that are student-controlled and low-pressure, with the aim of assisting academic language development.

It must be noted, however, that the principles of **communication of high expectations**, and **positive perspectives on parents and family** are not relevant to this present study because they mainly address poor achievements of some students in the United States of America, “students of colour” who are financially poor and have problems in their studies, be it caused by cultural differences or family support (Howard, 2012). **Reshaping the curriculum** is also not covered in this study as the purpose of the study is not to reshape or change the curriculum. **Student-controlled classroom discourse** was not engaged in this study as the researcher saw that small group instruction and academically-related discourse in the form of focus group interview should suffice. As

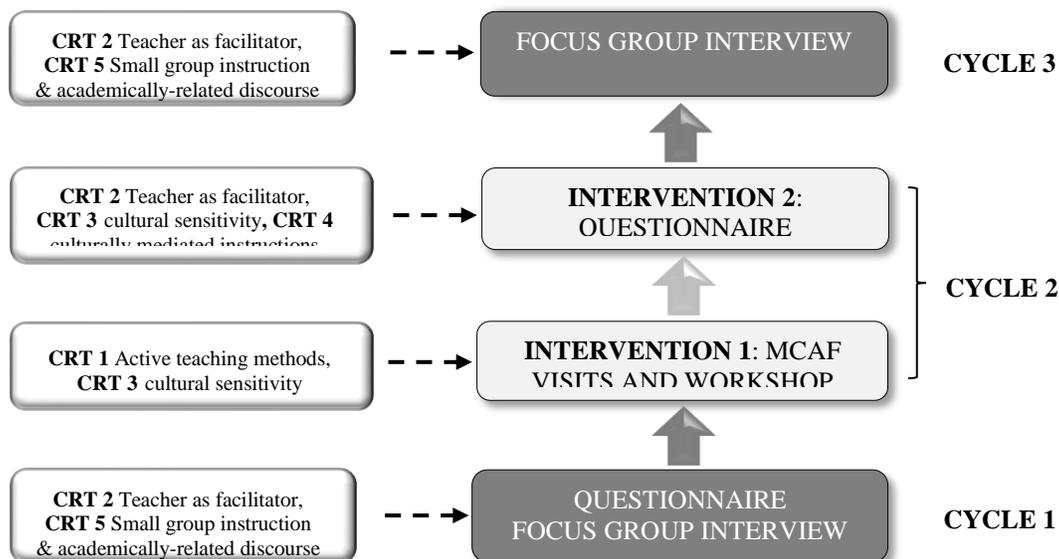
this present study revolves around students’ knowledge and understanding of some MCAF, the abovementioned CRT principles will not be included while planning the intervention activities.

Five CRT principles were engaged throughout and drove the pedagogy in this study. They were:

- 1) active teaching methods
- 2) teacher as the facilitator
- 3) cultural sensitivity
- 4) culturally mediated instructions
- 5) small group instruction and academically-related discourse

Figure 5 shows underpinning principles of Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) in this study.

Figure 5: Relevant Culturally Responsive Teaching principles underpinning the research.



The researcher designed a case study action research approach to implement the interventions in the study of the case of a selected graphic design class. Action research enables an open-ended, reflective and interpretative “conclusions” to be made. According to Mertler (2012), there is no definite conclusion in action research as the results are open for consideration and further improvement, due to the other collection of data and observations made. The strengths and weaknesses identified will be evaluated to determine the next course of action. The area of study in the present research concerns the cultural dimension and because culture is not stagnant, each individual has various degrees of knowledge, understanding, interpretation and application of it, there is no definite answer. Due to it being about change, synergy, and egalitarian, with the focus on society and the environment, action research is acknowledged commonly. As there were 3 cycles of research in this study that yielded a rich pool of data from 4 sets of questionnaire, 2 focus group interviews, the constant triangulation by comparison and contrasting of data had rendered this research credible and trustworthy. In addition to that is peer advice and reviews, and a peer observer’s critical observation. In action research, triangulation is important for credibility, trustworthiness and consistency of the data (Mertler, 2012).

There were 3 cycles in the study where intervention activities took place at Cycle 2. The CRT principle of the *teacher as the facilitator* was applied at Cycle 1: Although the focus group interview protocol and semi-

structured questionnaire were designed by the lecturer, the discussions and answering was left to the students to complete, with the lecturer prompting them. As such, the lecturer facilitated the session; Another CRT principle – *small group instructions and academically-related discourse* – was also applied at this cycle, where the class was divided into small groups for focus groups interview. The topic of discussion revolved around culture, MCAF and graphic design education. From Cycle 1, the researcher gathered information about the students’ understanding in their knowledge of MCAF and possible reasons that led to that understanding before planning and designing in any intervention activities for Cycle 2.

The interventions took place in Cycle 2, where two different activities that incorporated the four selected MCAF were infused into the class room. At Intervention 1, a visit was conducted to an art gallery, the students partook in a batik workshop, they also visited the Mah Meri cultural village, attended a talk about wayang kulit and viewed some of the exhibits there. The CRT principles that were applied at Intervention 1 were *active teaching methods* and *cultural sensitivity*. The teacher (researcher of this study) planned and organised these workshops and visits, which were conducted by relevant expertise in the respective fields. The students participated actively in those activities. When organising these activities, the teacher carefully selected these MCAF based on their cultural background and considered the cultural implications of those activities.

Intervention 2 saw to the students completing semi-structured questionnaires pertaining to the activities they partook in Intervention 1. The principles of CRT that were engaged at Intervention 2 were *teacher as the facilitator*, *cultural sensitivity* and *culturally-mediated instructions*. The teacher facilitated the students' learning by not directly steering them to specific answers but planned and designed semi-structured questionnaires. When designing the questionnaire, *cultural sensitivity* was involved, such as consideration of the multicultural background of the various students in this class. The questions in the questionnaire were *culturally-mediated* as they were in English, the main language for class instructions, a language students were used to and comfortable with. The questions also geared towards the students' familiarity towards the MCAF after the activities.

Once the students had completed the intervention activities in Cycle 2, Cycle 3 was carried out, where a focus group interview was conducted to study the understanding of their knowledge in the four MCAF after participating in the intervention activities. The CRT principles that were engaged at Cycle 3 were *teacher as the facilitator* - the teacher supported the students' learning through asking prompting questions, giving suggestions but not final answers as each student's interpretation is unique; and *small group instructions and academically-related discourse* - the focus group interview was held in small groups, allowing comfortable environment for the students to express themselves and the content of the interview revolves around

culture, MCAF and graphic design understanding.

Results

Cycle 1

Cycle 1 sought to find out the initial understanding of graphic design students of batik, wayang kulit, Mah Meri masks and contemporary Malaysian art. The data collected from a focus group interview and triangulated with data from a subsequent questionnaire provided the researcher with the possible reasons that led to the students' initial understanding of the said MCAFs. The emerging answers led the researcher to plan relevant intervention activities pertaining to the four MCAF.

There were four pre-determined themes – know, seen, experience, and understanding cultural meanings based upon the questionnaire that was used to elicit data.

Knowing refers to “the sense of self evidence or obviousness, recall, or recognition, whether truthful or mistaken.” (Storkerson, 2009) This theme in the question seeks to find out students' recall of all the four MCAF, regardless if their recollection correctly defines any of the four MCAF. Prior knowledge is important because they help learners to remember, reason and acquire new knowledge (Bransford, et al., 2001). As the data emerged, some of the initial knowledge of the MCAF that the students' possessed, were through hands-on experience learnt in school.

Seeing, in the context of visual learning is one of the important learning styles when it

comes to education. According to Paivio (1969), images and pictures are significant to learning as it is a way to concretise knowledge. This is supported by Santoro's (2014) point of view that visuals play a role in graphic design education. In the questionnaire, the category of seeing is embedded in to ascertain and triangulate the data regarding the students' knowledge of the MCAF.

When students are given the opportunity to **experience**, their learning is strengthened (Comenius, 1896). Aural, visual, tactile, olfactory and emotional stimuli are all part of experiential learning, which are involved as a process of learning, created by transformation of experience (Kolb, 2014; Hansen, 2000). The experience emphasised in the questionnaire focused on students' experience in 'making' or 'creating' any of the four MCAF as the subject matter is art forms.

Understanding is a little more complex than knowledge in that it requires accurate interpretation of information, the ability to differentiate between congruence or contradiction between concepts or principles, identifying inconsistencies, or information that is illogical and the ability to put together elements of knowledge into an integrated conceptual system (Rycus & Hughes, 2001). In the subsequent sections, the students' initial understanding of each of the MCAF will be discussed according to the abovementioned pre-determined themes.

Referring to Table 1, in the case of batik, the number of students' **knowing** (18 out of 20)

and having **seen** (14 out of 20) batik was high but it did not reflect a deeper understanding of this MCAF. The number of students having **experience** in working on batik was lower (8 out of 20) than know and seen. The number of students **understanding** batik is the lowest (5 out of 20), compared to knowing, seeing and experiencing.

As for wayang kulit, the results were similar to batik's – higher in the themes of **knowing** (18 out of 20) and **seeing** (13 out of 20), and lower in the themes of **experiencing** (6 out of 20) and **understanding** (3 out of 20). This could be because these two MCAF are the most common traditional art forms that are available to the Malaysian public, with batik having more attention due to it being a fabric that is more applicable in many ways such as fashion and other decorative purposes.

Knowledge, seeing, experiencing and understanding Mah Meri masks are even lower compared to the first two MCAF. Only 3 students out of 20 **knew** about this art form, 2 out of 20 had **seen** it before, 1 out of 20 had **experienced** it and also only 1 out of 20 **understood** what it is.

Contemporary Malaysian art fared a little better than Mah Meri masks but still not as well known as batik and wayang kulit. 9 out of 20 students **knew** what contemporary Malaysian art is, 9 out of 20 had **seen** it before, 4 out of 20 had **experienced** it and 7 out of 20 **understood** what it is.

Table 1: Students' initial understanding of selected MCAF before any intervention activities (Note: The numbers in the table indicate the number of students).

MCAF	Know	See	Experience	Understand
Batik	18	14	8	5
Wayang kulit	18	13	6	3
Mah Meri masks	3	2	1	1
Contemporary Malaysian art	9	9	4	7

Table 2: Reasons that led to students' initial understanding of selected MCAF.

MCAF	Reasons (derived from Cycle 1's questionnaire and focus group interview)
Batik	"Reading", "School", "Civic studies in primary school."
Wayang kulit	"I have been to museums that had this on display", "never studied nor watched a wayang kulit performance before."
Mah Meri masks	"The cultural and art form never been taught or even talked about in my province", "never came in contact with mah meri [sic] masks."
Contemporary Malaysian art	"I was fairly uninterested about Malaysian contemporary art, mainly because I thought local contemporary art could not differ much from foreign ones."

Referring to Table 2, reasons for students' initial understanding of batik were mainly due little or basic experience such as reading, having learnt it in primary school. The reasons for initial understanding of wayang kulit were that some students having seen it in museums before, while some never even came into contact with it. Not being taught or even mentioned about were the reasons students' initial understanding of Mah Meri being low. Having assumptions

that contemporary Malaysian art was indifferent was cited as the reason for students' initial understanding.

Cycle 2 and Cycle 3

Cycle 2 was a set of activities for the students to partake in to enhance and enrich their experience and understanding of the selected MCAF. These activities were participating in a batik workshop (Fig. 6 and

Fig. 7), attending a talk and exhibition on wayang kulit (Fig. 8 and Fig. 9), followed by a visit to Mah Meri cultural village (Fig.

10 and Fig. 11) and a visit to a contemporary Malaysian art exhibition (Fig. 12 and Fig. 13).

Figure 6: Students doing batik work in the workshop.



Figure 7: A group picture taken with the workshop facilitator.



Figure 8: Students viewing wayang kulit exhibits.



Figure 9: A group picture taken with the wayang kulit expert and speaker.



Figure 10: A group picture at the entrance of the Mah Meri Cultural Village.



Figure 11: Some of the students trying out weaving at the Mah Meri Cultural Village.



Figure 12: One of the students viewing an exhibit at the contemporary Malaysian art exhibition.



Figure 13: A group picture taken at the contemporary Malaysian art exhibition.



Source: Figures 1, 3 – 13 Photographed by Yip, J. (2016).

After each activity completed at Intervention 1, the students filled out a questionnaire (Intervention 2). At Cycle 3, they partook in a focus group interview to elicit information

from the students regarding the understanding of their knowledge in the selected MCAF.

Table 3: Difference in students' understanding before and after participating in intervention activities.

MCAF	Before intervention activities	After intervention activities
Batik	"Before this workshop, batik was a 'responsibility' to me. I made it once in high school, it was fun, but no one guided us."	"The batik workshop today was a fun and exciting exercise. I gained knowledge now about the process on how it is made and why the quality is good."
Wayang kulit	"...never knew that much details about it as I have never studied nor watched a wayang kulit performance before."	"I get to see the patterns details of wayang kulit clearly in a close distance. The wayang kulit artwork is very interesting, it is colourful even though it is shown in shadow form that is only black and white."
Mah Meri masks	"Honestly, I had never heard of Mah Meri or even aware of it."	"Mah Meri is so beautiful and unique." "Of course, the crafts they produce are also jaw-dropping. Almost everything there were handmade."
Contemporary Malaysian art	"I have made a few design works that implemented some form of Malaysian art but I never really understood or studied it."	"Each of the artworks are unique but shared the same concept which is about the culture in Malaysia. The artworks bring out the culture difference by using colours, materials, and also the method the artworks are created"

As found in Table 3, which features students' comments in the questionnaire and focus group interview, there is a difference in their understanding before and after participating in the intervention activities. What was seen as a chore when learning about batik before the intervention activities is now as more appreciation about the art form. Getting to experience wayang kulit during the intervention activity has changed

the students' mentality that it is an old and useless art form. Mah Meri cultural village visit had enabled the students to see the beauty and uniqueness of the Mah Meri masks. The visit to an art gallery to view contemporary Malaysian art had made students learnt more about Malaysian culture, deepening their understanding of this art form.

Discussion

The data collected from Cycle 1, and relevant data from Cycles 2 and 3 provided

ancillary support for the researcher to have a better grasp of the students' initial understanding of the four MCAF, as well as the possible reasons that led to that initial understanding, and planning for intervention activities.

Students' Initial Understanding of MCAF, Reasons that Led to that Understanding and the Need for Intervention Activities.

1) Batik

For batik, the students' lack of understanding is most likely due to their minimal experience pertaining to this cultural art form. Understanding cultural meanings of batik is the culmination of knowing, seeing and experiencing this MCAF because our understanding of a phenomenon happens when we build relationships between facts and concepts (Huitt, 1998). Therefore, the minimal experience in batik making could be the reason for the lack of understanding of this MCAF.

2) Wayang kulit

Those who knew what wayang kulit was commented that the knowledge is mainly a general concept that this MCAF is a very old traditional art in Malaysia. From the questionnaire data, it shows less than half the class had much experience in watching a wayang kulit performance. This is reflected in a focus group interview response,

“I grew up thinking that the puppets were actually really small and like, I thought they were like a smaller stage like, uhm, the Western ones cuz

[sic] the Western ones were [sic] pretty small.” (Cycle 3 focus group interview, 07 December 2016, JY)

The possible reason for the low number in understanding the cultural meanings of wayang kulit could be due to not having enough experience in watching the performance and being immersed in the whole ensemble of a wayang kulit performance such as speaking to the dalang (puppeteer) to learn more about this MCAF and to know more about the musical performers that play the background music for the performance. As mentioned above, experience is important for a learner as reflection and contemplation takes place when one is engaged in the 'doing' in learning (Huitt, 1998).

3) Mah Meri masks

As for Mah Meri masks, not learning about this MCAF, never came into contact with or even heard of this MCAF before were among similar answers given by students in Cycle 1's questionnaire. In terms of experience in making this art form, one participant shared that it was through doing some research from the Internet that he/she knew that Mah Meri is a rare Malaysian tribe and is well known for their wood carving art. The data from Cycle 3's focus group interview triangulates with this,

“I don't really know anything about traditional Malaysian art work and stuff and like, the Mah Meri, sometimes you just like, you just see like, oh they're just like people from the village.” (Cycle 3 focus group interview, 07 December 2016, CB).

4) Contemporary Malaysian art

For contemporary Malaysian art, it is found that the participants' knowledge of contemporary Malaysian art came from thoughts that this MCAF was not dissimilar to foreign ones. Some of them never thought that other cultural art forms, such as batik and wayang kulit, could influence contemporary Malaysian art. Those who claimed to have seen this art form mentioned that it was through the television programmes that aired art galleries featuring contemporary Malaysian art. Therefore, this indicated that the participants' understanding of the cultural meanings behind contemporary Malaysian art was not in-depth, as they opined that there lacks the representation of 'Malaysianness' in those works.

This is further emphasised by GKY, during Cycle 3's focus group interview,

“when I went to the KLCC exhibition [referring to the contemporary Malaysian art exhibition held at Galeri Petronas in Suria KLCC], I was really surprised how they involve [sic] cultural arts into their artwork because it's so different and unique that we don't see.” (Cycle 3 focus group interview, 07 December 2016, GKY).

In sum, although these students had a general knowledge of MCAF, there was no in-depth understanding. The main reasons were little to no hands-on experience and lack of exposure to these MCAF. Therefore, this indicated the need for intervention

activities to be included in the graphic design classroom.

Students' Enhanced Knowledge After Intervention Activities

As mentioned previously, in Cycle 2, the students partook in intervention activities revolving around the four selected MCAF. Thereafter, a focus group interview was conducted at Cycle 3. From the data, the researcher categorised the activities into “Hands-on” and “Understanding”.

Hands-on approach refers to a method of instruction where students' learning is guided by experience. Students are given the opportunity to work with their hands on the subject matter of learning (Ekwueme, et al., 2015). Understanding takes place after hands-on experience. This is because the stored memory from action based activities can be prompted when the students are exposed to similar subject matter. This creates a meaning making process, relating to past experience.

1) Batik

After the workshop on batik, the students' remarks about their hands-on experience in batik showed some changes. Some commented that although the process of making batik is tedious, they enjoyed it because they were properly guided.

“The first time I experienced batik was like a few years ago in primaries <inaudible> I don't remember it then coming back and doing it again was just nice and then that guy (batik workshop facilitator, En. Y) also used

different techniques from what we did before so that was like eye-opening.” (Cycle 3 focus group interview, 07 December 2016, JY).

They found the session educational and interesting. “If the hand and brain learn to speak to each other intimately and harmoniously, something that humans seem to prize greatly, which we call autonomy, begins to take shape.” (Wilson, 1999). Students’ comments in Cycle 2’s questionnaire show that after experiencing the making of the art form itself, one can see that the students found that it was fun and not outdated at all. This is resonated in the focus group interview,

“It actually has a lot of meaning inside, so you have a new appreciation of it. The same also with the batik.” (Cycle 3 focus group interview, 07 December 2016, SC).

Besides having strong cultural affiliations, batik, an art of printing on fabric, offers a good lesson to graphic design students in printmaking. From having a visual idea, refining it, drawing it on fabric, determining the areas to be coloured right up to producing the final outcome, it reminds students that the design process is important.

2) Wayang kulit

For wayang kulit, although the students did not get to make a wayang kulit puppet or watch a wayang kulit performance, their witnessing the actual artefact at close proximity was considered as “hands-on experience” because they were able to see and feel the puppets, getting to know actual

materials that the puppets were made from. This experience had changed their mindset about this MCAF. The patterns and details of the wayang kulit puppets, which reflect an apparently high craftsmanship, were noticed by the students during the exhibition.

The students commented in Cycle 2’s questionnaire that, after attending the talk and exhibition, they now knew that this form of art was unique but dying. This is seen as enhanced understanding as compared to their previous understanding. As the younger generation and graphic designers, they voiced that they need to preserve it. When triangulated with Cycle 3’s focus group interview, the students’ response reiterates the above.

“Never really thought it would be actually that fun, and really learn a lot more about the facts behind all the traditional stuff. Especially for the wayang kulit. I never really, like, knew how serious it was, that this art form was actually diminishing and it really boosted that thought in my head about preserving all these.” (Cycle 3 focus group interview, 07 December 2016, ML)

Form, shape and patterns are elements of design are fundamental knowledge every graphic design student should have, and this is not only available in contemporary sources. Cultural art forms such as wayang kulit offer interesting aspects of these elements of design, plus cultural meanings.

3) Mah Meri masks

The hands-on knowledge at the Mah Meri cultural village was action-based activities. In this visit, the students experienced weaving, a mock wedding ceremony and viewing wood carved sculptures and masks.

“The villagers [are] very smart to use the plants around them. They use rough surface leaves as a natural sand paper to smoothen out the wooden sculpture made by themselves.” (Questionnaire, 26 November 2016, NYX.)

After the visit, the students commented that the Mah Meri art is beautiful, amazing and it is unbelievable that manual tools could create such sculptures and masks. The researcher noticed that there was also deepening of students’ understanding of their knowledge in this MCAF after the visit to the cultural village.

“I have been to villages like that before but this time we actually explored it and got to walk around and talk [sic] to people and learn [sic] about their culture and how they live.” (Cycle 3 focus group interview, 07 December 2016, JY)

In this day and age of digital technology, for graphic design students to experience manual production of art should be encouraged as it hones the students’ observatory skills, and their appreciation for meaningful cultural elements and the plurality of Malaysian culture.

4) Contemporary Malaysian art

Hands-on experience that the students had in relation to contemporary Malaysian art before they visited the exhibition was confined to superficial class room works and they never really understood or studied this MCAF. However, after visiting the exhibition, the students commented that they see a uniqueness in each art work despite the sameness in concept, all somehow related to Malaysian culture, while connecting to global issues. They were able to describe how colours, materials and methods engaged in creating those artworks evoke a cultural differentiation. Again, although during the visit, the students did not literally partake in any hands-on activity, their previous hands-on experience supported their viewing experience at the art gallery.

While they understand that each contemporary Malaysian art work has its roots in Malaysian culture, they are also tied to a global issue, as found in comments in Cycle 2 questionnaire. This possibly mean that the students understood that this MCAF has local and global influences. The change in understanding shows that the visit had enabled the students to see that contemporary Malaysian art is deeper than only the visual aspect. This is further found in the students’ response in Cycle 3’s focus group interview.

“And then the art gallery was actually, it was pretty fun, because, like, it’s very hipster-y with a traditional twist because it’s, all the paintings there are [sic] nice, which is like, it’s very hipster-y where it’s all like new modern takes on old classics.” (Cycle

3 focus group interview, 07 December 2016, VLC)

The students' understanding of Malaysian culture is seen as having more appreciation and probably deepened from the discovery they made at the gallery visit. This could be due to the fusion, multimedia and multilingual kind of art forms that were exhibited that captured the students'

attention and made them think about other perspectives of Malaysian culture. For a graphic design student, the old and the new are all to be embraced. Knowledge of the current and the past informs the mind and open up doors for idea generation.

Table 4 features the researcher's summary of students' understanding before and after participating in the activities.

Table 4: Summary of students' understanding before and after the intervention activities.

MCAF	Before intervention activities	After intervention activities
Batik	Batik was seen as a chore to be completed at school, an old art form that is slow and complex in its making process.	The printmaking process is important to ensure good quality, and therefore appreciation for batik had increased. Idea inspiration can come from batik patterns.
Wayang kulit	Never knew much about it due to lack of study, never watched wayang kulit performances and the impression that it is a very old, traditional art form.	Wayang kulit puppets have unique shapes, forms and patters. This MCAF needs to be preserved as it is dying.
Mah Meri masks	Never heard of nor aware that Mah Meri exists. Had the preconceived notion that the cultural village visit would be annoying as the students deemed themselves as city people.	Mah Meri is an open-minded and unique culture, their art forms strongly reflect their beliefs. Mah Meri handmade crafts are beautiful and unique.
Contemporary Malaysian art	Had some experience in creating some form of Malaysian art but no understanding of deeper meanings. There was little interest in contemporary Malaysian art as there was an impression that it was the same as foreign ones.	Every contemporary Malaysian art work has its own story yet they shared a common concept – Malaysian culture – connecting those works to Malaysian roots and at the same time related to global advancement.

Conclusion

The outcome after participating in the MCAF activities were quite different from before the participation. The students spoke and commented at such length that they had

fun, some of them in awe or even in disbelief of their discovery of each MCAF and that each MCAF had its own uniqueness. There are even visual elements in each MCAF that the students can relate to

– batik for its printmaking qualities, wayang kulit its form, shapes and patterns, Mah Meri masks for their manual art making process and contemporary Malaysian art for its combination of local and global visual representations. There was more understanding in not only the cultural meanings of those MCAF but also other perspectives such as the making processes, appreciation for the delicate beauty and details, as well as seeing the relevance of those MCAF.

From the results of this study, intervention activities communicated through the medium of graphic design education, which engaged in some CRT principles, seemed to have enhanced the students' understanding of their knowledge in MCAF. Hollins

(1996) posited that cultural practices serve as learning tools within and out of school. This shapes thinking processes and forms the link between graphic design education and knowledge of cultural art forms. CRT is suitable as it utilises elements of culture, in this case, cultural art forms that are visual representatives of the graphic design students' cultural backgrounds, as meaningful ways to learn, know and understand culture in relation to design (Nieto, 2000). Graphic design education therefore is a viable communication medium to impart valuable knowledge regarding MCAF to Malaysian graphic design students.

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