# STUDIO PEDAGOGY FOR SITUATED LEARNING IN THE CULTURESCAPE

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This paper presents insights gained from developing studio pedagogy for situated learning in relation to the *Culturescape* study abroad program, which has been conducted for students of the Faculty of Art & Design at the Monash University Centre in Prato, Italy on an annual basis since 2009.
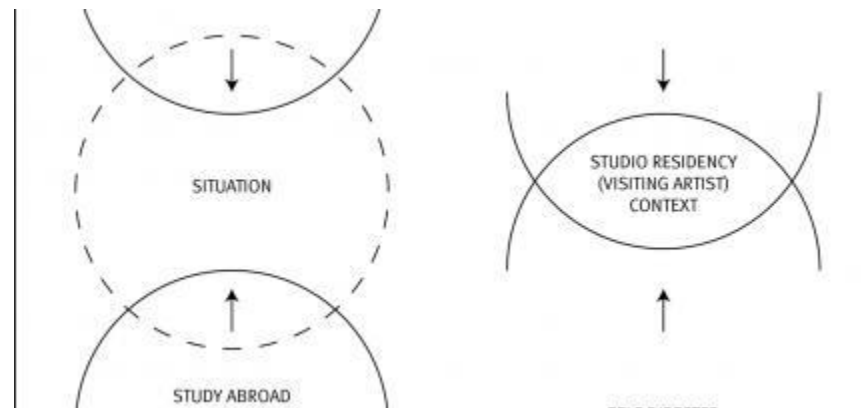
Culturescape's meta-learning contexts, Diagram. © Vince Dziekan.

1. Introduction

The *Culturescape* program has been conducted for students from the Faculty of Art and Design at Monash University in Melbourne on an annual basis since 2009. This study abroad program is undertaken as an intensive and immersive studio residency over a five-week period at the university's international center in Prato, Italy. The curricular orientation of the course has been designed with a focus on exposing undergraduate Art and Design students to independent practice through introducing them to the potentials for creating communication experiences that combine site-specific, location-based practices with digital image-making and creative technology. During their studio residency, participants are given the unique opportunity to develop individual and collaborative projects that respond creatively to their experiences of place, space and community.

2. Institutional Context

2.1 MONASH ART AND DESIGN

Monash Art and Design is an integrative center for socially engaged research and teaching, with a commitment to the creative enrichment and physical and cultural sustainability of our communities through visual art, design and architecture. Established in 1998 as part of Monash University, one of Australia's

Group of Eight research-intensive universities, the faculty is the university's authority in the area of visual culture.

As a collegiate community, academic staff are committed to studio teaching and research that reflects the diversity of approaches found in contemporary visual culture and the design of the built environment. While such a 'teaching/research nexus' develops from an understanding of the basis of disciplinary practices and applicable research methodologies to their fields of inquiry, the ability to foster an attitude towards the larger subject of 'practice-based research' in Art and Design is supported by the capacity to apply these forms of knowledge, both conceptually and in practice, towards collaborative and transdisciplinary contexts.

2.2 MONASH UNIVERSITY CENTRE, PRATO

Internationalization is an important catalyst for both education and research across Monash. Over the past decade, Monash Art and Design has conducted a regular series of study abroad programs at the university's key physical presence in Europe: the Monash University Prato Centre.

Located within easy proximity of Florence, the center itself occupies the Palazzo Vaj in the historic *Centro Storico* of the medieval walled city of Prato, which established itself prior to the Renaissance as an important civic and economic center, particularly in respect to the textile trade. Subsequently, the town became a leading industrial center in the nineteenth century, with Italian historian Emanuele Repetti describing it as the "Italian Manchester." As a by-product of trade and industrialization, Prato has experienced significant social repercussions from both internal and external migration. Today, the city has one of the largest Chinese immigrant populations in Italy, second only to Milan. [1] Prato, thus, provides a unique base for conducting intensive studios where Art and Design students are encouraged to respond to their cross-cultural experience of the paradoxes that abound in globalized contemporary society, while being exposed to the dominant cultural legacy of the West: the Italian Renaissance.

3. Contexts for Meta-Learning

3.1 OVERVIEW

This remainder of this short commentary article will broach some of the background and contextual considerations that inform *Culturescape's* educational approach to developing a studio pedagogy that engages with situated learning in relation to emerging creative technologies. The text will provide a general overview of how the course structure has been designed in response to its institutional and 'meta-learning' contexts by offering a series of provisional observations that reflect upon the course's pedagogical structure, project design and student experience.

According to Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger [2], 'situated learning' acknowledges how the process of knowledge is co-constructed, occurs in context and embedded within a particular social environment. Theoretically, situated learning stands in contrast to most conventional forms of teaching and learning activity where the 'knowledge' (and 'know how') is largely abstracted by being encountered out of context. Through the integration of fieldwork in and around Tuscany, complemented by active studio engagement and critique, students are provided with an expanded studio experience. This composite 'learning environment' combines a curricular structure designed to interrelate with its cultural setting

and social situation enabling them to explore their studio practices through designing creative content for emerging art and design practices, including a particular focus on 'geo-cinema' – which according to artist Pete Gomes is "the new cinema of commuting; variable and embedded in motion, locations, and fluidity." [3]

In an educative sense, 'meta-learning' places an onus on how the learner's understanding of the learning context and the phenomenon of learning *itself* contributes towards gaining subject-specific knowledge. Described as the process by which learners become increasingly aware of habits of perception, inquiry and learning that have been otherwise internalized, [4] the concept of meta-learning emphasizes the central importance of independence to the subject of study and, more specifically, to the roles that inquiry and reflective thinking play in learning contexts. In particular, self-identity and self-development provide an important connection to the 'ontological dimension' that characterizes the nature of art and design learning where "the development of knowledge, practical skills, cognition and technical expertise, are closely interwoven with the development of feeling, perception, confidence, sense of purpose and identity, and a tangible enrichment of lived experience." [5] In order to develop their skills in greater self-reliance, students are required to engage in meta-cognitive activities that develop awareness of both their conceptions of the subject of study and of themselves as learners in learning contexts that are comprised of "a complex array of interrelated factors." [6] [Fig.1] As succinctly encapsulated by Tara Winters: "Meta-learning is often associated with ideas of self-regulation, self-motivation, self-reflection and independence as a learner, making it a concept of particular interest to art and design educators." [7]

3.1.1 DISCIPLINARY (SUBJECT) CONTEXT

While available for any student in the faculty, the curriculum design of the *Culturescape*program is best suited for students situated in the middle stage of their tertiary studies in design-based disciplines in Visual Communication, Multimedia and Digital Arts; and Fine Arts students specializing in photo-based contemporary art practice. The integrated program draws upon an existing suite of units, that when so combined, support the multidisciplinary study of new media design and contemporary image arts. Briefly, the unit offerings that are made available to participants as part of *Culturescape's* integrated program include:

Digital Imaging studies in *Digital imaging* and *Digital Imaging Studio*

Digital Imaging focuses upon creative image production for a range of digital media applications. In this unit, students explore the creation, manipulation, composition and output of digital images with increasing conceptual understanding of representational issues, visual language and communication. For its part, *Digital Imaging Studio* is designed to offer students with the opportunity for self-initiated investigation of imaging approaches and digital media specialization specific to their proposed projects.

Photomedia studies in *Photomedia Fabrication* and *Photomedia Virtual Studio*

Photomedia Fabrication builds upon the skills and knowledge of photography by focusing upon creative image production through 'fabricated' photographic approaches that develop their understanding and application of lens-based photography by exploring the construction of photographic reality. Meanwhile, *Photomedia Virtual Studio* promotes the development of creative skills through a combination of analog and digital techniques, exploring lens-based and soft-imaging for print and screen-based output.

3.1.2 STUDY ABROAD (SOCIO-CULTURAL) CONTEXT

The course delivery is structured around an intensive five-week study program. In addition to attending formal studio teaching blocks, there is the associated expectation that students will thoroughly engage in independent study (both in and out of studio, through personal fieldwork and site visits) to achieve expected coursework requirements.

The following standard format has been used to guide the weekly program delivery:

Mondays are dedicated to studio work involved with the collaborative production of the assigned directed project designed to directly engage with *Culturescape's* main emphasis on locative media and relational forms of communication design. Complementing the group activities that are a feature of Monday's studio, Tuesdays are dedicated to self-directed project work over the duration of their residency. Each participant is expected to propose and negotiate a major individual project, which will come to represent their study abroad experience. This approach affords the students with the opportunity to experience what it means to work as an 'artist-in-residence.'

Formal presentations and semi-formal seminars are held regularly on Wednesdays. The nature of these lectures evolves over the duration of the course, culminating with a forum where all participants present and report on their individual project outcomes. Wednesday afternoons are set aside for short, focused excursions to cultural sites and galleries in Florence or other locations within the region. Dedicated site visits are made to major cultural heritage sites, including the Duomo di Santa Maria de Fiore, the Uffizi Galleries and L'Accademia. Complementing the attention paid to Renaissance art, special onus is also placed on visiting contemporary exhibitions curated by the Centro di Cultura Contemporanea (CCC Srozzina) at the Palazzo Strozzi.

Perhaps surprisingly, significant contemporary exhibitions have also been presented in Prato itself, as well as its neighboring town, Pistoia. Last year the Commune di Prato hosted a multi-site project by Thomas Ruff that innovatively presented works by the German photographer within the institutional spaces of its civic offices. Palazzo Fabroni in Pistoia hosted the particularly relevant exhibition: *Viaggio in Italia*, which presented a wide cross-section of works inspired by encounters with Italian life, culture and landscape produced by leading contemporary artists ranging from Carsten Holler and Thomas Struth, to Carlos Garaicoa and Richard Wilson.

Given the wealth of places to experience that are within easy reach of Prato, Thursdays are used for conducting day-trips to Bologna, Sienna, Lucca and Pisa. While cultural tourism acts as the primary focus of visits to these major regional centers, in a large number of instances these experiences provided the impetus for ideas that would become fully distilled and articulated later in studio works. Finally, Fridays are treated as 'open studio' days for independent study or fieldwork.

The routine of this regular weekly schedule has been broken by the main annual excursion to Venice for the *Venice Biennale*. The opportunity to attend this leading international cultural event showcasing contemporary art (Daniel Birnbaum's *Making Worlds* in 2009) and architecture (Kazuyo Sejima's *People Meet in Architecture* in 2010) has proven to be particularly inspirational to the students and has made a significant impression on the subsequent development of numerous individual's self-directed studio projects.

3.1.3 STUDIO RESIDENCY (VISITING ARTIST) CONTEXT

As indicated previously, the visiting artist or artist-in-residence model offers a distinctive way of describing the studio context in which meta-learning takes place in *Culturescape*. The program's studio pedagogy is put into practice through two complementary, self-supporting projects: a collaborative, directed project and an individualized, self-initiated studio project. Given the limitations of this paper, I will only expand at this time upon pedagogical considerations associated with the directed project and how this brief was used to instill an underlying sense of situated learning, that, in turn, underpins the self-directed studio projects that would eventuate.

Collaborative, Directed Project

Upon commencement of the course, the students were presented with a directed project. This brief was employed as a means of challenging the participants to give form and meaning to their initial experience of Prato, its local vernaculars and environs. Importantly, the project was collaborative in nature and emphasized the forming of social relationships at the inception of the study abroad experience. The project was used as the principal focus of creative activities over the first half of the study abroad residency; this balance switched towards individualized, self-directed studio investigation following the excursion to Venice (which has effectively acted as the juncture between these respective projects).

Thematically, the directed projects run in both 2009 and 2010 have focused on the narrative potential of communicating mediated scenarios designed to be experienced directly in public space. The assignment encourages the students to conceive of a form of cross-media storytelling that draws upon the 'psycho-geographic' features of the local environment of Prato; Psychogeography being defined by Guy Debord in his 1955 *Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography* as the study of "the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals." The spirit of this form of inquiry is used to draw from the student's immediate subjective response to finding themselves in an alien situation; drawing out from this the meta-cognitive subject of the exercise: a knowing, self-awareness of the multi-dimensional nature of their creative practice as situated in the roles of student, tourist, explorer, ethnographer, social commentator, filmmaker, etc.

On the occasion of CS2010, the following assignment brief was issued:

Quattro Bastioni

Prato is a classic example of a medieval walled city. Referring to the map of Prato, each group is assigned to one of the four main gates or 'bastioni' that acted as main 'command and control' points of the town in the middle ages, monitoring movement by regulating entry and exit of who and what was allowed in and let out. Connect each of these nodes with another by determining three intermediate locations along a walking route. At each designated location, a specifically assigned piece of media is to be played on a hand-held portable media device. Each group determines the narrative relationship between media content and where it is to be played in situ.

The studio project was supported by supplementary lecture content and studio exercises. An introductory lecture was presented in order to establish key precepts relating to site-specificity and digital technology; portable and distributed media. The historical legacy of site-specific installation (such as Walter

De Maria's *The Lightning Field* and Richard Serra's *Titled Arc*) as well as Nouveau Realisme (which proponent Pierre Restany described as "a poetic recycling of urban, industrial and advertising reality") and Situationism were overviewed in an effort to broaden the frame of reference that the students could bring to their creative development. The currency of situated practices was supported by illustrating the diversity of contemporary works by the likes of Kryztof Wodicko and Janet Cardiff, in addition to graffiti and other forms of cultural intervention in public space including pervasive gaming.

Complementing this content, an introductory creative exercise was instigated as an exploration of photographic reconnaissance and narrative structures. Following a shooting brief whereby the students were directed to conduct a one hour photographic reconnaissance of Prato, each student was issued with a series of design challenges as a way of applying a selection of their resulting images for narrative purposes. These focused on formal principles of juxtaposition, the relationship of image and text as well as storyboarding, while narrative voice was explored through forms of first and third person perspective and dialog.

4. Concluding Observations

Through the combined contexts provided by its expanded studio, *Culturescape* places an emphasis on participants engaging in meta-cognitive activity, thereby encouraging each student to become increasingly aware of their studio learning and the context of these processes in their institutional settings and situatedness in highly context-specific environments.

In summary:

By drawing upon the subject-specific features of photography and digital imaging, *Culturescape* emphasizes the role of communication design and new media arts in the creative conception and design of cross-platform communication experiences.

Culturescape operates as a flexible learning environment that places importance on processing 'field' experiences through studio practice. The resulting 'expanded studio' draws from the visiting artist or artist-in-residence model, thereby exposing the student to aspects of independent professional practice and practice-based research.

The curricular framework of *Culturescape* transitions from directed to self-directed projects. In order to do so, the pedagogical role of a 'geo-cinema' project is used to promote attentiveness to cultural specificity and the situated nature of studio learning experience.

References and Notes:

1. According to available statistics, 10,000 legal Chinese residents were living in Prato in 2008; a figure significantly lower than the 45,000 estimated by local authorities taking into account illegal immigrants. First arriving in the early 1900s, the majority of Chinese work in businesses and workshops related directly to the garment industry. In 2010, raids on factories employing illegal labor highlighted the social and economic tensions that exist in the Pratese community.

2. Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger,Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1991).

3. Pete Gomes, "Being On Location: The Beginnings of 'Geo-Cinema' and 'Place Code,'" 2004, http://www.mutantfilm.com/node/45 (accessed August 1, 2011).

4. Donald B. Maudsley, A Theory of Meta-Learning and Principles of Facilitation: An Organismic Perspective (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1979).

5. John Danvers, "Towards a Radical Pedagogy: Provisional Notes on Learning and Teaching in Art & Design," International Journal of Art and Design Education 22, no. 1 (2003): 47-57.

6. Tara Winters, "Facilitating Meta-learning in Art and Design Education," International Journal of Art and Design Education 30, no. 1 (2011): 90-101.

7. Tara Winters, "Facilitating Meta-learning in Art and Design Education."