

## Title

Crossing the Cultural Aisle: from Australia to India transforming studio learning through artisan textile workshops.

Pending: Book Chapter Crossing the Aisle: Multi-and Interdisciplinary Collaborations in Education: Research, Models of Collaborative Teaching, and Sources of Inspiration

## Fashion and textiles: a collaboration across disciplines

The field of fashion and textiles is inter-disciplinary by nature, requiring designers to work collaboratively across a range of specialisations, including patternmaking, construction, textile design, graphics, styling, photography and film. At the University of Technology Sydney (UTS), students learn these skills by responding to a design brief, a document outlining a series of creative tasks linked to specific learning outcomes that the students must complete. Through these briefs, students build skills and expertise that they can continue to draw on throughout their future careers.

As educators, we are interested in how off-site education settings, such as professional design environments, can contribute to the acquisition of tacit knowledge in professional design practice. Our teaching has revealed a gap between the high levels of skills the students acquire in their studies and their ability/confidence to translate these skills in a professional setting. These observations have led us to reflect on the need for students to be exposed to, and engage in, authentic workplace or studio situations in order 'to be able to apply theoretical knowledge in context to create real meaning and learning.'<sup>1</sup>

This in-practice essay describes our efforts to address this gap through the creation of a Global Studio program for UTS fashion and textiles students. Since 2012, this program has enabled undergraduate students to travel to India to study studio-based weaving and knit, and woodblock printing in remote and urban artisan textile studios. Developed by UTS senior lecturers Alana Clifton and Cecilia Heffer, in collaboration with Julie Lantry, Director of non-profit organisation Artisan Culture, this studio subject is a literal example of how crossing the cultural aisle can support students to embed global, practice-oriented expertise into their fashion design and textiles practice.

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<sup>1</sup> Benvenuit, S., Heikkinen S., Ip, T., and Younis, Z. (2017). Introduction to Authentic Learning-Environments, Experiences and Field Work. In J. Branch et al., (Eds.). *Innovative Teaching and Learning in Higher Educations* (p. 269-282). Oxfordshire: Libri Publishing.

## **The Global Studio: an inter-disciplinary model of off-site learning**

This paper presents the Global Studio as a model for off-site learning that helps to bridge a gap between the textile design skills learnt in a classroom setting, and the application of these skills into fashion design outcomes, and finally a professional industry environment. The model resonates with the theoretical position that situated cognition<sup>2</sup> as learning reflects both the physical and social environment and offers students opportunities to experience new ways of thinking, alternative perspectives, collaborative knowledge and reflectivity that they can apply to other discipline subjects and real-life situations.<sup>3</sup> Our observations of these studios have affirmed to us that design knowledge is about human relationships, empathy and collaborative practice. When students in these workshops form strong connections with local artisans through the process of learning their craft, they develop a more mature understanding of their own place/responsibility within the global fashion ecosystem. The impact of this learning can be evidenced in how they progress in their studies into future years of study and post-graduation, and is favorably viewed in interviews for master's programs and/or professional industry employment.

### **Introducing the case studies**

The two case studies described in this chapter provide a snapshot of the Global Studio's evolution over time. The first case study presents a collaboration with weaving studio Kullu Karishma where students learn skills in weaving, knitting and natural dyeing in the picturesque mountain village of Kullu. This studio is coordinated by UTS educator Alana Clifton, a fashion and textiles designer and researcher who specialises in machine-knitted textiles.

The second case study presents a collaboration with Tharangini, a Bangalore-based studio that specialises in hand woodblock printing. This studio also features a collaboration with fashion designer Sudhir Swain, who helps students translate and make up their woodblock printed textiles into fashion garments. This studio is coordinated by UTS educator, artist and researcher Cecilia Heffer, who is internationally acclaimed for her contemporary lace work.

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<sup>2</sup> Brown, J. S., Collins, A., & Duguid, P. (1989). Situated cognition and the culture of learning. *Educational researcher*, 18(1), 32-42.

<sup>3</sup> Benvenuit, S., Heikkinen S., Ip, T., and Younis, Z. (2017). Introduction to Authentic Learning-Environments, Experiences and Field Work. In J. Branch et al., (Eds.). *Innovative Teaching and Learning in Higher Educations* (p. 269-282). Oxfordshire: Libri Publishing.

### **Global Studio program concept**

The Global Studio program was conceived in 2012 through a conversation with Julie Lantry Director of Artisan Culture, an Australian fashion and textile designer who resided and manufactured in India for over 20 years. In 2011 while, Julie was undertaking a master's degree at UTS, she saw an opportunity to share her extensive fashion knowledge gained through working closely with artisans in India. As an advocate for sustainable and ethical practice, Julie was concerned by the impact of emerging advanced textile manufacturing technologies on traditional artisan techniques. Where once these textile techniques were family traditions passed down through generations, now younger generations are increasingly departing their ancestral villages to pursue employment and education opportunities in major cities in India and globally, with many of these customary textile techniques now nonexistent.

Introducing our students – future fashion and textile designers and influencers to India's specialised textiles artisans, history and techniques could open the door to future collaborations between the two countries. As educators, we were also inspired to show our students the rich textile cultural traditions on which these artisans' livelihoods are built.

### **Early iterations development of the Global Studio program**

These international textiles subjects subject first came about as a combination of our teaching experience and Julie's knowledge to design a study abroad textiles subject. Now called the Global Studio program, this initiative is funded by UTS BUILD, a dynamic, cross-cultural global exchange program at UTS. Our first artisan textile workshop took place in Delhi, India in 2012 and has since evolved into a successful Global Studio program. Over the last eight years, more than 200 UTS Fashion and Textile students have participated in these studios in locations such as Delhi, Pushka, and Vrindavan. In 2015, we established our current Global Studio programs with Kullu Karishma and Tharangini.

### **Research methodologies**

The observations for this paper have been gathered from July 2012 to December 2019 and use a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methodologies to help us continue refining the studio experience. These include:

**Participant observation:** This methodology provides opportunities to observe how students learn in a cultural global studio context, giving the educators to an in-situ understanding of student learning and

skills transfer.<sup>4</sup> These observations have recognized a knowledge exchange process whereby the educators participated in activities alongside students to gain inside perspectives of textile making processes, and understanding cultural codes and situations. In addition to observing the studios themselves, the educators collected video and photographic documentation with permission from the studio hosts, artisans, and students.

**Student Feedback Surveys (SFS):** This is a formal, UTS-approved method of subject evaluation. Quantitative and qualitative data is gathered at the conclusion of the Global Studio from each participating student, providing subject coordinators and teaching staff with crucial evidence on engagement and learning. The evidence gathered supports the ongoing development of the Global Studios objectives and learning outcomes, which must also align with Australian higher-education strategic initiatives, values and visions.<sup>5</sup> This data articulates the value of the Global Studio program, and the impact this has on students developing their own design philosophies for future studies and professional careers once they graduate.

**Ethnographic methodologies: personal narrative:** Personal narratives in the form of visual and verbal statements from the studio hosts, artisans, students and the educators reveal insights into studios' teaching and knowledge exchange processes, as well as the emotional connection of learning and making by-hand. These narratives are collected while in-country on the Global Studio in the form of informal interviews, video recordings and personal conversations. While each student journey is distinct, the cumulative experiences collected in these stories provides a valuable endorsement of the Global Studio curriculum.

## **Global Studio: Program description**

Each Global Studio requires a year of collaborative planning between UTS educators, the studio hosts, participating UTS students, Artisan Culture and our funder, UTS BUILD. The subjects are offered as a textile elective worth 6 credit points for students in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> year of the UTS Fashion and Textiles Bachelor of Design degree. It consists of approximately 15 hours of pre-departure design and cultural research in Sydney, Australia and between 60–70 hours face-to-face teaching over a two week intensive block in India.

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<sup>4</sup> Gürcüm, B.H., & Arslan, P. (2015) The Importance of ethnographic research in textile design. *In IJASOS-International E-journal of Advances in Social Sciences* 1(3):470  
DOI: 10.18769/ijasos.08521

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.uts.edu.au/about/uts-2027-strategy>

Between 12–14 students attend each studio; participants are selected based on a written application and interview process in which they must demonstrate an interest in either weave and knit, or woodblock printed textiles, as well as a desire to travel internationally and learn in a unique cultural environment. Many students who attend the program haven't previously travelled to India; some have never left Australia, consequently the Global Studio program has enabled students to travel to remote locations internationally under leadership of UTS educators.

## **Before the Studio**

### **Curriculum and assessment**

The Global Studio subject curriculum aligns with UTS's core outreach goals, which support students to develop a sense of global citizenship through sustainable and ethical design practice and collaboration. The learning objectives for this immersive studio are to bridge the gap in students' knowledge by equipping them with tacit technical skills that, due to industry decline, cannot be taught in Australia.

The studio is based on a design brief that includes the assessment tasks and outcomes, and requires students to complete a series of research, design and reflection assignments before and during their two weeks in India. While the Global Studios to Kullu and Bangalore use the identical assessment criteria, it is important to note, that due to differences in the Global Studios outcomes, the timing and the artifacts that are produced and when the student work is assessed is different. This is due to some essential components of the assessment brief that are required to be produced before departure, such as, the woodblock print for carving prior to the students arriving in Bangalore, India. For the students travelling to Kullu, the majority of the learning and tasks are completed in-situ. The curriculum and assessment tasks have been approved by UTS Design faculty and are summarised as follows:

### **Cultural considerations**

In developing these briefs, we consider how to create favorable conditions for learning between students and the workshop artisans. The artisans may not speak English; therefore, students will need to draw on independent thinking, engage their decision-making and communication skills and use their initiative-skills that are directly transferable to a multitude of workplaces in order to manage their time in the studio. We are mindful of designing curricula that is culturally respectful – when introducing the design tasks to students, we discuss the concept of cultural appropriation and ask students to develop their design inspiration from their own experience of Australian culture. Julie Lantry is invited to provide designer talks on her experience of working with Indian artisans, that includes practices that students must apply to conduct themselves whilst in India, which at times can differ to how students may work

with local fashion and textile industry in Australia. This includes suggestions of how to best perform in and outside the studio, appropriate dress code and ways of being culturally sensitive. India is a complex rich culture so there are always surprises we can't account for. An example of this is when an owl design was rejected by the Master Woodblock carver as it is considered bad luck in his culture.

### **Pre-departure preparation and information**

Students also attend up to six, three-hour pre-departure workshops to discuss:

- Assessment tasks (expectations, outcomes, day-to-day activities)
- Cultural consideration talks and discussions
- Health and safety, including travel documentation (which include signing a UTS mandatory code of conduct, medical forms, details of next of kin, emergency contact numbers, signing insurance forms, valid passport, visa application, international money cards, travel advisory cards)
- Financial considerations of the Global Studio, which includes travel, tuition and incidentals
- List of practical information on what to bring, medicines, clothing and food
- Outline of workshop (weaving/ block printing), introducing basic terminology and skill sets. Students view work produced by students on preceding Global Studios to gain an understanding of the scope of the work they will undertake
- Pre-departure preparatory design work, setting up digital platforms and design journals
- Introduction to Global Studio hosts and facilitators (in-person or via online platforms to provide students with insights into the local environment and customs)

### **Case Study – Kullu Karishma, Weaving Studio, Himachal Pradesh (2015-2019)**

Co-ordinated and taught by Alana Clifton (Knit specialist)

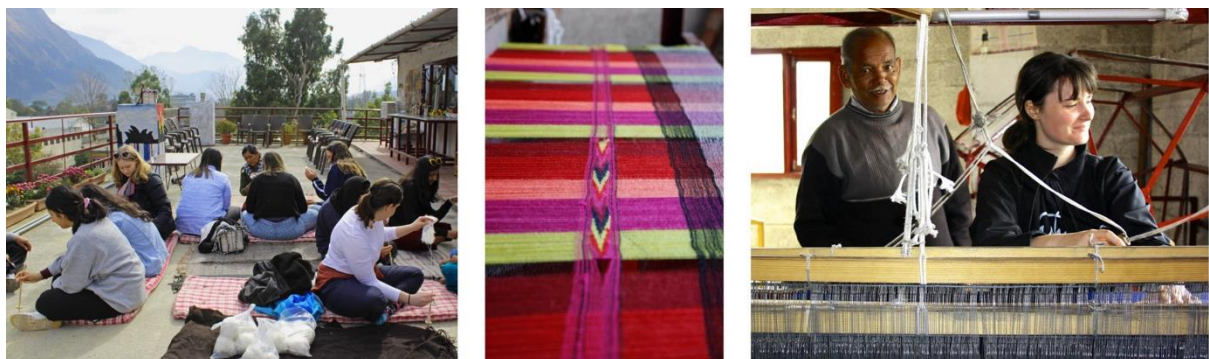


Figure 1: Kullu Karishma Studio, Kullu, India. Images: Alana Clifton (2016, 2017 and 2019)

## **Background to the Kullu Karishma weave studio**

Kullu Karishma is a family-run textile studio in Himachal Pradesh that was founded by Kamal Kishore in 1991. Kamal, a scientist specialising in animal genetics, launched Kullu Karishma to build sustainable textile and fair-trade practices that provide employment for local knitters and weavers. Today, the business is managed by Kamal's son Kanishk; along with his team, Kanishk continues to work with small-to medium-scale designers to develop sustainable textiles and garments. The studio is known for hand-knitted and hand-loomed products that combine their own angora rabbit fur with Australian merino wool and other exclusive fibre blends. They work predominantly with natural dyes and finishes. Gaining hands-on practice in a successful textiles studio exposes students to the *farm to fashion* cycle with a focus on sustainable manufacturing.<sup>6</sup>

The weave studio program covers a range of textile techniques that are specific to Kullu Karishma and the Himachal Pradesh region. These techniques are selected for the Global Studio subject in collaboration with the Kullu Karishma team and with consideration of what is achievable within the studio's two-week timeframe. The aim is to help students gain new skills that they cannot learn as part of the UTS curriculum.

## **Pre-departure**

As mentioned previously, the students receive a design brief before departure from Sydney. The Global Studio program is intensive, and it is important for students to develop basic visual and practical knowledge prior to their arrival in Kullu; as such, they are asked to conduct initial research into India's cultural history and into key design topics such as colour theory, weave and knitting structures. This preliminary research is initially guided by the UTS educators; however, students are required to work independently in order to complete it. They also engage with a series of pre-departure studios that focus on the practical aspects of weaving and knitting, such as sourcing fabrics, examining samples, learning terminology and developing paper-weaving samples for their journals.

## **Assessment requirements**

To meet the requirements of the Global Studio program, students are required to complete a series of three assessment tasks during the two-week program. They are required to produce:

- a selection of knitted samples which demonstrated knitted stitch patterns specific to the region
- a knitted basic garment or accessories such as socks and/or beanie (dependent on skill level of student)

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<sup>6</sup> Julie Lantry, 'Kullu Karishma', December 2018, 2:51 <https://vimeo.com/303035952/caf3a43912>

- a series of natural dye yarn samples exploring the possibilities and properties of locally natural materials such as madder and eucalypt
- Instagram documentation of their knit and weave process including the cultural experiences while participating on the Global Studio
- a reflective journal documenting preliminary research, observations, design development, and final experiments
- 4-5 meters of woven cloth utilising their own colour combinations in collaboration with the studio creative director and UTS educators. The students learn every aspect of the weaving process, from selecting the yarn colour palette and winding the warp yarns to setting up the loom in preparation for weaving, winding bobbins with weft yarn, and orchestrating body movements to achieve a specific weave pattern

As students learn in different ways and at different paces, the project briefs are flexible enough to allow students to complete the majority of the assessment items and to demonstrate their new skills in the timeframe.

### **The Kullu Karishma experience**

On arrival in Kullu, Himachal Pradesh, the students meet the studio hosts and head out on foot to explore the local villages. This provides students with an opportunity to gain their bearings, meet local people, recognise social and cultural customs, and acclimatise to the weather.

The first interactions the students have with the artisans is the day after their arrival. The students arrive at the studio for introductions and a studio tour. The introductions between the students and artisans involves an informal meeting whereby students and artisans exchange names and greetings in Hindi and English. This introduction is facilitated by the studio host and his family, and even though the artisans understand only a small amount of English and the students a minimal number of words in Hindi, it is surprising how quickly relationships build between the artisans and students from this day forward.

After the initial introduction and greetings, the students are led by Kanishk, the studio host, and the artisans on a tour of the studio. The tour gives them the chance to familiarise themselves with the spaces and learn about the different departments and roles involved in the studio's day-to-day running, as well as to examine the process of fibre-to-yarn-to-cloth/garment. Kullu Karishma is a professional working studio and the students have been very fortunate to be introduced to many internationally renowned textile designers and fabric buyers that travel to Kullu in search of unique woven and knitted textiles. These conversations have enhanced the students understanding of issues around sustainability, business



(local and international), and textile traditions. It is important for the students to see how business is conducted, orders are consolidated and textiles are packaged ready for shipping around the globe. This behind the scenes opportunity allows students to appreciate the different roles and responsibilities of studio staff, and understand the functions of a business.

For their first activity, the students are divided into three small groups to undertake micro-courses in hand-loomed weaving, hand-knitting and natural dyeing under the guidance of specialist artisans and master weavers. In higher education, we are starting to see intensive learning as a new pedagogical method for practice-based teaching.<sup>7</sup> This approach allows students to develop new skills over a concentrated period that they can then apply to future projects or in the workplace.

Much of the studio experience takes place outdoors. This is primarily how the studio functions in warmer weather, with the artisan knitters gathering in small groups on patches of grass in the sun to share stories, food and knitting patterns. During winter and cooler months, the artisans work indoors in front of the warmth of heaters. The Global Studio program is situated during the Indian Autumn season to take advantage of the warm weather. Students are invited into the artisans circle and are taught hand-knitting skills that highlight rich patterns exclusive to the region and that have been handed down for hundreds of years. While language could be considered a barrier, students adapt to the viscosity of the knitting process; the group manages to exchange simple English and Hindi words ranging from routine greetings, to terminology associated to the techniques the students are learning. The artisans demonstrate the knitting techniques and the students follow, often dropping stitches and making mistakes, which is part of the learning process.

The hand-loomed weaving and natural dyeing processes follow a similar pattern of learning, with master weavers demonstrating the synchronized foot pedal and hand and body movements required to create a variety of weave patterns. This part of the program is conducted indoors on timber and metal custom made weaving-ooms. This tacit knowledge that is shared in-situ is transferred to students through the tactility of physical making. Citing Waks, Lantry notes: 'Through the practical experience, the student is learning under close supervision of the master, not just about the skill, but industry communication and

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<sup>7</sup> Niinimäki, K., Salolainen, M., and Kääriäinen, P, (2018). Opening up new textile futures through collaborative rethinking and remaking. In N. Nimkulrat et al., *Soft Landing, Cumulus Think Tank, International Association of Universities and Colleges in Art, Design and Media* (p. 53-70). Publication 3.

problem solving through reflection-in-action.’<sup>8</sup> The students undertake the weaving studio 9:30am – 5.00pm Monday-Friday and the program is as follows:

- **Kullu Karishma Workshop Week 1-** Introduction to Kullu Karishma studio and artisans, demonstration of steps involved in the yarn spinning process (fleece to yarn); Demonstration of setting up the warp yarn in the loom for weaving, bobbin winding and functions of the four-pedal loom; Experimentation on the loom, understanding body functions required to achieve specific patterns; Designing weave using available yarn colours and referencing pre-departure gathered researched; Natural dyeing workshop using local materials; Introduction to basic knitting techniques and regional stitch patterns in preparation to knitting a basic garment or accessories
- **Weekend** – personal time, local market visits, walking tours and museum visits.
- **Kullu Karishma Workshop Week 2** - Weaving length of cloth (this can take a novice 2-3 days to weave 4-5 metres), including washing and pressing of final length of cloth; Continuing with knitting samples/basic garment or accessories; Finalising samples in journal and updating Instagram account
- **Studio critique and review of final work, in-situ** - Our two weeks ends with an open critique/review of the students’ weaving and knitted garments/accessories. Our hosts and the artisans attend and offer informal verbal feedback as part of the process. On this final day, we conclude with a meal which involves the students learning to cook local dishes, gifts are presented to the hosts and artisans as a final thank you gesture.

### **Daily reflections: Sharing stories, knowledge and food**

Each evening around the campfire, students share what they have learnt throughout the day. Niinimäki et al., suggest, ‘Creativity thrives in an atmosphere of openness where there is space for equal give and take, ...students working together for the common goal of learning.’<sup>9</sup> This is an opportunity for show-and-tell with students, peers and the hosts at the studio. Part of the learning experience for the students is to reflect on their day: ‘The value of making tacit knowing explicit is reflective practice’s contribution to

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<sup>8</sup> Lantry, J., (2015), *Artisan Culture: Rethinking sustainability through collaborative exchange between emerging Australian designers and Indian artisans in fashion and textiles*, Master’s thesis, UTS.

<sup>9</sup> Niinimäki, K., Salolainen, M., and Kääriäinen, P., (2018). Opening up new textile futures through collaborative rethinking and remaking. In N. Nimkulrat et al., *Soft Landing, Cumulus Think Tank, International Association of Universities and Colleges in Art, Design and Media*. (p. 53-70). Publication 3.

discovery and learning.<sup>10</sup> Students work on digital journal and visual diary entries that capture their daily cultural experiences and learning. The journal entries are visual and annotated reflections and summaries which include daily workshop activities. These include designing weave patterns to understand scale, pattern and colour in preparation for weaving on the loom, writing knitting stitch instructions, and recipes for natural dyeing. The students include their own personal reflections as part of their entries, along with feedback they have gained from the artisans and educators relating to the techniques they are learning. When the students return to Australia, these digital and hand-created journals are then used as a way of disseminating their experiences to other students studying fashion and textile design, as well as to the wider audience at UTS. This knowledge exchange and storytelling is essential in facilitating the learning experience and providing students with rich experiences that can transform their creative practice.

At the conclusion of the studio experience, students demonstrate their new skills through an open critique. The work they have produced, which includes weaving and an array of knitted garments and accessories, are displayed for everyone to view. The students receive feedback from the artisans and studio hosts on the strengths within their work, as well as on areas for improvement.

## Case Study – Tharangini Woodblock Printing Studio, Bangalore (2015 – 2019)

Co-ordinated and taught by Cecilia Heffer (Print specialist)



Figure 2: Tharangini Woodblock Print Studio, Bangalore, India. Images: Cecilia Heffer (2019)

### Background to Tharangini Woodblock Studio

The key focus of this program is on woodblock printing and sustainable dye and print practices. As outlined earlier in this chapter, this Global Studio enables 12-14 students to undertake a two-week workshop at

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<sup>10</sup> Candy, L., (2020), *The Creative Reflective Practitioner: Research through making and practice*, Routledge, UK.

Tharangini, a woodblock print studio based in the busy urban city of Bangalore. This unique studio, established in 1977 by Padmini Govind, specialises in artisanal woodblock printing and is acknowledged nationally and internationally for high-quality hand-print methods and sustainable production practice. It also houses one of the largest woodblock collections in India, an extraordinary archive made available to our students through the remarkable generosity of our hosts.

### **Assessment requirements**

The design brief covers a range of print methods that are part of the overall assessment submission. By the end of the workshop, students are expected to complete:

- a one-color woodblock design
- a one-metre printed length of their woodblock design in repeat using pigment pastes
- a printed scarf design that uses natural dye pastes, a combination of woodblocks from the Tharangini archive and their own woodblock design
- a three-metre discharge print on indigo dyed cloth using a combination of woodblocks from the Tharangini archive and their own woodblock design
- a considered fashion garment that is printed using the discharge technique. This will be created using the indigo dyed cloth described above.
- a two-metre pigment-printed fabric length that can be designed into a cloth book or kept as a length. This work enables an exploration of the Tharangini archive using unexpected combinations of woodblock prints and colors
- an Instagram documentation of their print process and cultural experiences during the workshop
- a reflective journal documenting their preliminary research, observations, design development
- a folio of print experiments.

### **Pre-departure** (*Planning the workshop, pre-departure task 1, pre-departure task 2*)

Planning the program itinerary is a collaborative process between Padmini, Julie Lantry and myself as we share our areas of expertise. Each year we review the itinerary to enhance student learning. This is informed by our observations, responses from student feedback surveys and talking directly with students. Julie researches interesting studios, fashion outlets and sustainable production houses to visit in the vicinity of Tharangini while Padmini and I plan out the technical printing contents of the workshop which is balanced with the pedagogy of the subject. In planning the program much of our conversation revolves around what is feasible to cover in a two-week workshop. We discuss how the week should be divided between introductory demonstrations of techniques and self-initiated learning and how to

balance this with site visits to outside studios. Factors such as cost and time are taken into consideration as some print techniques are more involved than others. The program itinerary is as follows:

- **Tharangini Workshop Week 1** – introduction to the studio and artisans, demonstration of woodblock carving, demonstration of natural dye printing, printing a scarf design using natural dyes, printing repeat exercise in pigment, introduction to discharge printing, discharge print for garment three meters.
- **Weekend** – visits include fashion fabric outlets and markets where trims, buttons, sequins can be sourced, fashion design stores to view new emerging Indian fashion design collections, museums and art galleries to learn about local history and culture.
- **Tharangini Workshop Week 2** – steaming and washing discharge printed lengths. Visit to fashion studio to meet with designer Sudhir Swain and discuss how their garments will be made. Introduction to colour mixing and pigment printing, individual project designing print combinations from the Tharangini woodblock archive
- **Studio Party** - Our two weeks ends with a fashion parade and an open critique/review of the students' prints and garments. All the artisans attend and the students present gifts from Australia to thank them for their work and Padmini for hosting us.

#### **Pre-departure Task 1 – designing a woodblock design**

Before their departure to India students need to design a one-color woodblock print. In briefing the students, we discuss issues around cultural appropriation and authentic ways of taking inspiration from the world around us. Motifs are to explore the principles of woodblock design through a personal narrative that reflects an aspect of their life in Australia as opposed to a direct copy or reference to Indian iconography. Many students are from multi-cultural backgrounds, which has often resulted in thoughtful translations of the brief.

On our arrival to Bangalore we are presented with our hand carved designs which is not only an incredible welcome but where students first learn the material realities of the first step of their collaboration. Seeing the care and skill a craftsperson has taken in translating their designs teaches the importance of investing care and time into the quality of a design as it is part a broader fashion and textile production system.

#### **Pre-departure design Task 2: the fashion garment**

For their second pre-departure task, students are required to design a garment that will be a vehicle for their hand block print. To do this, students use their knowledge of two disciplinary areas – fashion printing

and fashion design as a means to visualize how their woodblock prints will work on a three-dimensional garment in relation to the body. This task has proven to be valuable in providing students with the experience of how they will work collaboratively with fashion studios and production units. Once in Bangalore, they work with fashion designer Sudhir Swain, head of the Roopa Pemmaraju label, to bring their designs to life.

### **The Tharangini experience: a learning space**

The direct collaborative learning between artisans and students takes place once we arrive in Bangalore on the first day of the workshop. Padmini welcomes us to her studio, introduces her team and presents an overview of Tharangini that covers a comprehensive overview of her business and the challenges of running a sustainable and ethical print studio. The physicality of the space is very appealing and observing this space teaches the students how a well-run workshop operates. Tharangini is highly organized with a system of numbered woodblocks, printing tables, swatches of block print references, steamers, a washing bay and a color mixing and drying area. The women are in charge of dyeing, color mixing and matching and administration, while the men are in charge of woodblock printing.

Over the course of the next two weeks the workshop becomes a collaborative professional learning space involving an exchange between students, artisans, Padmini and myself. The workshop is organized so that there are usually two to three students per print table, with each table supervised by an artisan for the whole duration of the workshop. The working hours of the studio are from 10am to 4.30 pm with half an hour for lunch and chai tea is available throughout the day in a steaming hot thermos. Each morning we go over the tasks of the day, which may include a new print technique or showing a range of sample prints from the archive, the students then set about their work. During the course of the day the students will each receive student feedback on their project and bring the group together to point out any interesting design breakthroughs that may arise. In this setting we have found that the collaboration between artisans and students evolves quite naturally. Students will ask their artisan how to do something or the artisan steps in and shows the student how to resolve any technical problems that may come up. An example of this might be how to print a motif so that it flows around the corner of a scarf or how to fix a printing mistake. While students are working on their own prints, the studio continues with its business. Padmini interacts with her artisans and receives visiting clients from countries such as the US, Switzerland, Israel, India. This buzz of professional activity opens the students' eyes, not only to the inner dynamics of a working studio but also to its operation as an ethical for-profit business. In this way, it offers students something intangible that a classroom setting cannot provide which is the many layers and human relationships that make up a professional studio, its rhythm and working cycle. Importantly, it helps

students understand the inter-disciplinary nature of a design studio and their role/responsibility as designers within it.

### **The Tharangini experience: artisans and students**

The collaborative process that unfolds between the students and artisans each year is intriguing and unpredictable as it is dependent on how each unique relationship forms. It seems that the students consolidate their own learning through the process of observing the artisan's expert practice and asking questions which often results in the student's own design knowledge and confidence being rapidly enhanced. The students are genuinely humbled by the artisan's knowledge of color matching and mixing and their knowledge of print. An example of this is witnessing the technical ability needed to print complex three to four color wood block prints in perfect meterage. These techniques are produced by hand which in turn has influenced the students own practice to value the bespoke in the design process which is increasingly being dominated by the digital world.

'With woodblock printing being one of the oldest forms of printmaking, learning firsthand from artisans, who were proud to share their skills was so rewarding. Being able to withdraw from gadgets, and learn the sustainable and ethical practice, this global studio was just that!' (Alumni Chloe Christie, 2020)

The social impact of the collaboration process is highly valuable. Despite language barriers, strong relationships form as artisans and students not only work on printing fabrics but learn about each other's families and lives, usually shared through photographs. The artisans take great pride in their work and like to share their expertise with the students; they find it amusing when the students attempt certain tasks and don't quite master them. Curiously, this lighthearted approach allows students to relax about what they don't know, removing the pressure to get everything 'right' the first time and encouraging them to learn on the job and keep refining their processes. Students also start to understand that there are many areas of expertise within the fashion and textiles discipline. When they go into industry, more often than not they will become a master of one design area and work collaboratively with many others. Understanding and forming relationships with who makes their clothes and produces their prints is a transformative moment in their education. Design academic Richard Sennett suggests, 'We can achieve a more humane material life if only we better understand the making of things.'<sup>11</sup>

The final outcome of the Global Studio is the printed fashion garment which comes to embody the collaboration that have taken place between artisans and students. To get their garments made up we

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<sup>11</sup> Sennett, R., (2008) *The Craftsman*, Yale University Press, New Haven, London.

visit the Roopa Pemmaraju studio and meet the label's embroidery artisans, pattern cutters and machinists. This visit is another highlight for the students, as it provides an insight into the industry they are training for. They get to view the latest collection, which typically combines colorful digital prints with elements of artisan hand stitched embroidery. Meeting with fashion designer Sudhir Swain to discuss the fit of the fit and detailing of the garment makes the industry they are wanting to work in real as they to communicate their vision to a third-party. The last day of the studio is celebrated with a fashion parade where both students and artisans celebrate their work and review what they have learnt and accomplished over the course of the workshop.

## **Discussion**

### **Off-site learning as a transformative experience**

The Global Studio experience offers students a deep life learning experience beyond classroom tutorials and shifts their focus away from assessments and grades. As a model for off-site learning it has proven to be highly successful in giving students a unique insight into *how* a studio operates as a network of human relationships and their role as designers within in this system. For many students, the experience is life changing. In the case of Alumni Antoinette El-Alam for example the Global Studio triggered an interest in hand generated printing methods. This led to a specialization in print in her final year fashion collection and onto a career in print design combined with teaching digital and hand silk screen printing.

The Global Studio gave me a stronger understanding and appreciation of handcraftsmanship. This is something I took into Honours year and beyond - embracing hand printed and bespoke textiles. I personally did this through manual screen printing (UTS graduate, Antoinette El-Alam, 2020).

This is in line with what we have observed as educators, that when returning to their studies at UTS, students display a maturity, confidence and depth of understanding that was not necessarily evident before. This translates as a curiosity and openness to what is possible. Graduate Mandish Kalsi's interview (see profile link below page xx) demonstrates how the Global Studio experience provided a direct pathway to her career as a designer and sustainable consultant in Delhi.

### **Benefits for artisans**

This question forms part of an annual discussion between the UTS teaching team, the studio directors and Julie Lantry. It is difficult to quantify the impact of the collaboration on the artisans; however, acknowledgement, pride, new ideas and ways of working, connection, exchange and renewed energy both in personal and design terms have all emerged as likely outcomes of their participation. The work that Alana has done in introducing and teaching machine knitting to artisans in Kullu has opened up



opportunities for the younger female practitioners who have been quick to learn the new technique and then gain employment with these new skills. Machine knitting in the Kullu Karishma studio is still in the research and development phase however these opportunities play out in learning a new skill and have introduced new products into the collection.

Padmini Govind Director of Tharangini believes that the artisans take great pride in a university sending students all the way from Australia to learn from them. The students bring energy and new ways of seeing and doing things that can challenge the traditional and sometimes fixed way the artisans are required to work. For example, because they aren't confined to a client brief, students work with colors and pattern combinations in ways the artisans often find surprising. Designer Sudhir Swain has been fascinated by the student's fashion designs and how they combine the woodblock prints in new and unexpected compositions. This is iterated in Julie Lantry's early research for her Master's into artisan collaboration with students on the inaugural 2012 Global Studio to Delhi (cited in Lantry<sup>12</sup>) suggests that a mix of ideas appeals to artisans:

I really liked collaborating with the student designers because I had my own ideas and the students [have] got their own ideas and they mixed [them] into a fusion and that's now something which I can teach my group of people as well, so I'm excited by that (Artisan, Delhi, 2012).

Padmini has noted that an exchange of ideas might not be immediate. Instead, it might surface months later, such as in a team studio meeting when an artisan will refer in great detail to a print one of the students produced. Rajeev Sethi, an highly acclaimed design director who has been part of our previous Delhi-based Global Studios, has also commented on the reciprocal nature of this exchange, as quoted in Lantry<sup>13</sup>: 'It is great to be able to combine such a culturally infused craft with the minds of young and creative designers like these students'.

### **Local fashion and textile industry visits**

The itinerary for both Global Studios includes visits to local fashion and textile industry visits, including design studios that work with with weaving and hand embroidery, factories and sewing initiatives that

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<sup>12</sup> Lantry, J., (2015), *Artisan Culture: Rethinking sustainability through collaborative exchange between emerging Australian designers and Indian artisans in fashion and textiles*, Master's thesis, UTS.

<sup>13</sup> Lantry, J., (2015), *Artisan Culture: Rethinking sustainability through collaborative exchange between emerging Australian designers and Indian artisans in fashion and textiles*, Master's thesis, UTS.

support local women through employment and retraining, and areas to source wholesale fabrics and accessories. The Kullu students have an opportunity to explore Old and New Delhi under the guidance of fashion designer Swati Jain. Swati works in industry as a consultant for a number of high profile clients, including Issey Miyake, and is an active advocate for artisan crafts. Her contacts and extensive knowledge in this area has greatly enriched the studio experience for the students. Through these tours, students gain a perspective on the scale of global textile production and creative approaches to consumption, as cited in Lantry<sup>14</sup>, a student commented that:

...New Delhi abounds in stores selling bundles of fabric remnants from the apparel industry. The streets outside the stores contain evidence of years of trade in fabric off-cuts. These markets fit with the philosophy I've been guided by in Sydney: to reduce the amount of fabric sent to landfill by repurposing difficult-to-use offcuts (UTS graduate, Anonymous, 2013).

In Bangalore, under the guidance of Sudhir Swain, students visit both a modern high-rise area and the old part of Bangalore to source fabrics; like Delhi, these neighbourhoods are home to an extraordinary array of shops selling of silks, embroideries, trims, sequins, threads and beading. Students explore high-end fashion and design stores to study contemporary uses of artisan woodblock printing, beading, embroidery, weaving and knitting by emerging designers. This exposure can be both stimulating and overwhelming; however, it is also good training for the future buyers/designers in the group who will one day go on company research trips to source fabrics, design ideas, colors and stories.

### **The evolving nature of the Global Studio**

Our vision for the Global Studios has been to find a way to enable students to literally 'cross the aisle' to learn interdisciplinary practices directly from artisans working in professional textile studios. The program has grown over the years and is ever evolving in nature. Through each iteration, we continue to co-design and shape the contents with our core stakeholders in response to global and educational concerns. As the student cohort changes each year, so does the program. As outlined in the introduction, in the early iterations of these studios, we travelled extensively with the students to visit a variety of workshops and textile locations – an approach that proved to be exhausting for everyone involved. As a result, we decided that basing ourselves at a single studio and exploring textile techniques specific to the studio and surrounding area was more beneficial for student learning. Consequently, in the last four years we have worked closely with Kullu Karishma Weave and Tharangini Woodblock Print. The strong relationships we have developed with these studios and their artisans have deepened our understanding of how to best to

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<sup>14</sup> Lantry, J., (2015), *Artisan Culture: Rethinking sustainability through collaborative exchange between emerging Australian designers and Indian artisans in fashion and textiles*, Master's thesis, UTS.

refine and focus our subject content. Each new Global Studio takes important lessons from the preceding year through observing participatory engagement, formal university student evaluations, and informal interviews and conversations. We are now recognized for our Global Studio programs, which offer a relevant insight into both local and international industry practice.

Looking back on my time on the Global Studio to Kullu Karishma, I see it as a turning point in my education. Upon returning, I was inspired to take on another similar elective, First Nations fashion, where I was able to continue industry collaborations within the security of a university structure. Since these two electives, my practice has become distinctly focused on the artisanal and handcrafted. This is a direct attribute of the deep appreciation that was developed in my time working in the international fashion industry setting on Global Studio (UTS graduate, Gabrielle Pagano, 2020).

We have found that Global Studio experience is attractive to future employers ‘...people are fascinated that I travelled to India as part of my university degree and my most recent employer says this was the edge that helped me get the job (UTS graduate, 2019)<sup>15</sup>.’ The impact and success of these Global Studios has seen other graduates continue to engage and collaborate with artisans in India (interview below) and secure a place on Masters design programs.

### **Lessons learnt**

The importance of streamlining content and pacing the workshop activities and site visits are among our key findings over the last eight years. Learning new techniques is important, but giving students adequate downtime and a sense of independence and freedom is key to consolidating their learning. Nothing is predictable; as educators, we can work hard to create the best conditions for learning but ultimately need to step back to see what unfolds in the space. Letting mistakes happen and empowering students to correct them is an important learning curve. Balancing the fashion and fabric sourcing with cultural art gallery and museum visits is key to a holistic experience. So is travelling light!

### **Recommendations**

This model of off-site learning can be easily adapted to disciplines beyond fashion and textile design. Educators in alternative fields can tailor their own set of teaching and learning principles that are explicit to their discipline or that allow students to explore and experiment in a more relaxed mode.<sup>16</sup> Some

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<sup>15</sup> UTS Graduate, (2019) Personal Communication.

<sup>16</sup> Bohemia, E., Harman, K., and Lauche, K. (2009), *The Global Studio: Linking research, teaching and learning*, IOS Press BV.

pragmatic recommendations for these studios would be to keep student groups to a manageable size of 12-14; partner with a consultant or industry expert either locally or internationally; research your chosen studios or partnering organizations; seek government assistance with funding where possible, such as education grants; make sure administration processes, such as filling out insurance and medical forms, are completed; interview students through a selection process; thoroughly brief students as to what is expected of them; be mindful of not over-reaching when designing the content/program; and finally, be agile and flexible to opportunities that arise on the trip.

### **Final reflection**

The global workplace is evolving at a rapid pace; education can't predict and prepare students for all the possibilities of the future world of work. However, the training we offer goes beyond the realm of disciplinary skills and knowledge to help students become creative thinkers, problem solvers, skilled interpersonal communicators and inter-disciplinary practitioners in an increasingly changing world.

The off-site classroom enables students from any discipline to be immersed in a professional working environment. We have found that the learning they gain from this experience provides them with critical insights into the profession they are seeking to enter. The Global Studio has highlighted that inter-disciplinary practice is a network of human relationships and knowledge and that skills in communication are key to collaborative teamwork. We hope this model will inspire educators from all disciplinary practices to explore these options in various original ways in their own field.

## Notes

The cultural significance and professional value these workshops offer have also been recognised by the cultural sector: in 2019, the Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation invited our students to exhibit their Global Studio weavings and prints at the Museum of Sydney. The event was part of an SCII Fashion Hub Festival and included a panel interview on the Global Studio experience conducted by editor of Vogue India Bandana Tewari, 2019.

Currently, the impact of COVID-19 is rapidly transforming the future of education; consequently, we have been in discussions about transferring the Global Studio model to a local manufacturing and social enterprise context. In Sydney, Australia, where UTS is based, there are many small studios, knitting enterprises and print workshops around which we could centre a practice-based studio. Engaging with diverse and multicultural communities and collaborating with local non-government organisations, Indigenous and refugee communities would provide students with the creative expertise and intercultural competencies required in the global field of fashion and textiles.

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- Kullu Karishma, Kullu, India
- Tharangini, Bangalore, India
- Designers Swati Jain, Delhi and Kolkata, Sudhir Swain Bangalore, India
- UTS BUILD
- The Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trading (New Colombo Plan, student mobility funding),
- The School of Design in the UTS Faculty of Design Architecture and Building
- Our wonderful fashion and textiles colleagues and all the incredible students that have participated and that have been part of this journey.

## Supporting material

Documentaries by Julie Lantry/Artisan Culture

The in-practice essay will provide the following links to films for readers to view from each Global Studios.

Tharangini Woodblock Print Studio, Bangalore

An interview with Padmini Govind, Founder of Tharangini Print Studio in Bangalore.

<https://vimeo.com/303004910/95c053d846>

Website: [www.tharanginistudios.com](http://www.tharanginistudios.com)

Kullu Karishma Weave and Knit Studio, Kullu

An interview with Kamal Kishore, Founder, and Kanishk Chandel, Creative Director, of Kullu Karishma weave studio.

<https://vimeo.com/303035952/caf3a43912>

Website: [www.kullukarishma.com/](http://www.kullukarishma.com/)

Tharangini is a woodblock print studio based in the IT center of India, Bangalore. It is highly respected for its sustainable hand-production methods and for its collaborative relationships with international designers in Australia, New York, UK and Sweden.

Kullu Karishma is a weave and knit studio located in the remote mountains in Kullu, India. It spins yarn from ethically farmed angora rabbits blended with Australian wool.

Alumni Case Study – an interview with Mandish Kalsi

<https://vimeo.com/303020606/d6a0489b33>

An example of how the global studios have deeply influenced our graduates can be seen in the alumni case study with Mandish Kalsi. After Mandish graduated from UTS, she returned to Delhi to work as a liaison between designers and production. Mandish now runs zero-waste workshops for Udayan Care, a charity for young orphan girls. She has also started an award-winning jewellery line using traditional embroidery in a contemporary way. [\\_mandysh](#) (Instagram)

#### **Additional links**

[www.facebook.com/UTS-Fashion-and-Textile-Design-Tours-145035925660712/](http://www.facebook.com/UTS-Fashion-and-Textile-Design-Tours-145035925660712/)

<https://www.scci.org.au/event/politics-and-fashion/>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IDtr7CJ--dk&feature=youtu.be>

(Annmarie Gad, 2018)

<https://www.lib.uts.edu.au/news/876303/embroidered-relations-india-to-uts-exhibition>

[\\_mandysh](#) (Instagram)

<https://handbook.uts.edu.au/subjects/details/88832.html>

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- UTS 2027 Strategy  
<https://www.uts.edu.au/about/uts-2027-strategy> [viewed August 2020]
- UTS graduate, Anonymous, 2013
- UTS graduate, Chloe Christie, 2020
- UTS graduate, Antoinette El-Alam, 2020
- UTS graduate, Gabrielle Pagano, 2020
- UTS graduate, Personal Communication, 2019