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Post-COVID craft education

Reflections on a virtual artisan woodblock studio exchange between Australia and India

ABSTRACT

This paper presents a hybrid model of teaching and learning that proposes new possibilities for exchanging tangible and intangible cross-cultural knowledge in textile craft education. The paper aims to demonstrate how online platforms can be used creatively to disseminate traditional craft knowledge and skills in new ways. The discussion centres on a unique virtual global studio between fashion and textile undergraduate students at the University of Technology Sydney and on an artisanal woodblock print studio, Tharangini, based in Bengaluru (Bangalore), India. The hybrid workshop was an adaptation of the studio in response to travel restrictions caused by the pandemic. The author argues that while the internet cannot replace the immersive cultural experience of studying in another country, digital platforms have a place alongside teaching to offer otherwise impossible opportunities. This paper explores a methodology for disseminating craft knowledge and skills across cultures through a combination of online and in-house practicum. Classes were structured around weekly Zoom sessions with Director Padmini Govind, where sustainable approaches to print production were disseminated through a suite of commissioned films and hand-carved woodblocks to explore on campus. The results show how this unique adaptation allowed students to interact with the artisan craft of woodblock printing in rich and varied ways, and it proposes that this novel hybrid model can be creatively adapted to future craft education in the 2020s.

Keywords:

Tangible and intangible knowledge, artisan craft, online global studio, cross-cultural exchange.

INTRODUCTION

The artisan textile global studio exchange at the University of Technology Sydney was initiated in 2012, and since then, it has taken over 200 fashion and textile students to India to learn the traditions of weaving, embroidery, knitting and woodblock printing in both remote and urban textile centres. The initiative was conceived by Julie Lantry, director of a non-profit organisation, Artisan Culture, which

advocates for sustainable and ethical practices. As a fashion designer who worked closely with Indian artisans, Lantry was concerned about the diminishing traditional craft practices, which are the livelihood of many communities. The reason for this is certain factors, including the introduction of manufacturing and a younger generation increasingly pursuing employment and education opportunities in major cities. Further, the situation has been exacerbated due to the loss of tourism caused by the COVID-19 pandemic; therefore, it is critical to identify new ways to disseminate artisan crafts more broadly (Dhasmana, 2023). Lantry reasoned that introducing Australian fashion and textile students to traditional Indian textile crafts could potentially inspire future cross-cultural collaboration (Lantry, 2015), a strategy that proved successful. Examples include former graduate Mandish Kalsi, who became a designer and sustainable consultant in Delhi, and Katia Kelso, co-founder of the fashion label Ilio Nema, who also works with artisan print studio Tharangini, Bengaluru (Bangalore). Please view the interview with Mandish Kalsi at the following link: <https://vimeo.com/303020606/d6a0489b33>.

The teaching and learning curriculum for artisan workshops was designed by the author and former colleague Alana Clifton-Cunningham and funded by UTS Global Mobility Programs, a dynamic global exchange programme. The focus of this paper centres on a post-COVID collaboration with the woodblock print studio, Tharangini, established in 1977 by Padmini Govind. The textile company is women-owned, proudly inclusive of its artisans and committed to organic, ethical and sustainable hand block production. Tharangini houses one of the largest woodblock collections in India, an extraordinary archive made available to our students through the remarkable generosity of our host (Figures 1 and 2). Govind is a leader in the field, actively sharing artisan culture and the artistry of woodblock printing with wider communities, promoting social outreach. Tharangini is the only artisan studio in India to have ISO 26000 Sustainability certification and the NEST Ethical Artisan Seal, and it is working towards carbon-neutral processing by 2024. All these elements are important learning points for the global studio curriculum, which disseminates artisanal knowledge in various ways by receiving visiting national and international designers, corporate companies and school groups (Figure 3). Tharangini actively promotes artisan craft through social media, such as Instagram @tharanginistudio (25.4k followers). During COVID, these platforms played a vital role in keeping impacted artisan communities connected to the world.



FIGURES 1, 2 AND 3. Tharangini archival woodblock and print (figure 1); Tharangini logo (figure 2); Artisan Krishna woodblock print demonstration with UTS fashion and textile students, Tharangini studio Bengaluru (Bangalore) 2019 (figure 3).

Due to recent world events caused by the pandemic, artisanal woodblock studios worldwide paused from 2020 to 2023, during which time the author was challenged to adapt the broader university textile curriculum to online learning. While there were challenges in this new digital teaching space, she discovered that the design outcomes from student work were still high in quality. However, problems associated with social isolation arose due to the lack of physical human interaction that face-to-face

teaching affords. In terms of global studios, it was a great loss to the textile curriculum, as they had become integral to the pedagogy of the degree. Aside from the rich cultural experience they offered, the global exchange served to address a specific knowledge gap in professional practice. For example, students in a class setting were unfamiliar with how to transfer designs to textile production in industry. The global studios fulfilled this gap, facilitating the need for students to contextualise and give meaning to their learning through immersion in authentic work placements (Benvenuit et al., 2017). Global studios thus proved themselves a successful off-site model not only for cultural exchange, teaching, and learning but also for professional practice (Figures 4 and 5). The author found that working directly with artisans enabled students to appreciate the complex tacit knowledge involved in all production stages (Clifton-Cunningham & Heffer, 2022). Further, global textile studios significantly enhanced student insight into the human stories behind the production of textiles, as advocated by the Fashion Revolution movement “who made my clothes?” (Omotoso, 2023).



FIGURES 4 AND 5. Director Padmini Govind sharing woodblock print samples 2019 (figure 4) UTS student Holly Johnson laying out pattern pieces to print in Tharangini studio 2019 (figure 5).

As a result of the insights gained through online teaching and the desire to offer global studios despite travel restrictions, the author saw an opportunity to create an online/on-campus workshop between countries. The virtual artisan global studio could never replace the rich, immersive cultural experience of working at Tharangini; however, the author was curious to see whether and how tangible and intangible craft knowledge could be transferred across cultures and time zones. While at Tharangini, the author observed the complex tacit knowledge involved in each step of the woodblock print process and wanted to determine how to share this process with students in Sydney. Craft theorist Richard Sennett describes tacit knowledge as a way of knowing through practice, such as the exact strength needed to grip and swing a hammer (Sennett, 2008). In the case of artisan woodblock printing, experiential knowledge (Dormer, 1997) informs the pressure required to hand stamp a perfect print in relation to the consistency of the print paste and the cloth on which it is printed. Practitioner knowledge is thus situated in the subtle nuances of daily practice and requires an attentive method to capture tangible and intangible knowledge (Vaughan, 2017). The method and medium through which the author chose to capture and disseminate tangible and intangible knowledge were a suite of demonstration films

commissioned from Tharangini on natural dye and print processes. A selection of woodblocks from the Tharangini archive was copied for students to learn woodblock printing (Figure 6), where students first gained a haptic understanding of the print process and then had the opportunity to design their own woodblocks. In addition, silkscreen printing was also introduced alongside their woodblock design. Overlaying these two print technologies produced innovative results that the artisans found fascinating, as discussed below (Figure 7).



FIGURES 6 AND 7. Copies of Tharangini archival woodblocks were commissioned for students to explore on campus at UTS Sydney (figure 6) Emerson White student woodblock design combines silkscreen printing (figure 7).

The virtual artisan global studio followed a practice-based model of reflective teaching and learning *through* making (Schon, 1983). As noted above, this approach to learning through studio practice was framed by the theoretical position that situated cognition is prompted by real-life situations that, in turn, open new pathways for collaborative thinking, alternative perspectives and reflectivity that can be applied to other disciplines (Brown et al., 1989). The subject was offered as a weekly three-hour workshop over 12 weeks, and each session would start with a conversation on Zoom with Director Padmini Govind, with her artisans present waving to our students. Their online presence made real this unique cross-cultural exchange between countries, cultures and time zones. The students' excitement in seeing the artisans was quite moving, given the physical separation caused by travel restrictions. The weekly Zoom meetings prompted and exposed students to broader discussions on sustainable and social/cultural concerns in artisan crafts. As noted above, the films served as initial online woodblock print demonstrations that students then disseminated and explored in the print room on campus. UTS supported the virtual artisan global studio through New Colombo Plan funding, as this adaptation to off-shore learning was the first of its kind in the School of Design—the following shares the discoveries that emerged through this novel model of craft dissemination.

Tangible and intangible cultural exchanges of knowledge: the value of disseminating traditional craft skills in new ways

The stakeholders in this experiment were Tharangini Studio, the author (representing the UTS fashion and textile programme) and UTS International, which facilitates the Global Studio Mobility programme. Demonstration films proved an invaluable medium for capturing the nuanced material language, artistry and complexity infused in the woodblock process, tacit knowledge that is otherwise impossible to articulate (Carter, 2004). Filmmaker Anahita Ananth produced the films in consultation with the author and Govind, who drew from their previous knowledge in planning the woodblock print itinerary. The

films were no longer than five minutes, artisan voices were uncut and background noises of the workshop and traffic were included. This brought the ambient environment of Tharangini into our learning space, giving a sensorial, tangible form to an otherwise intangible experience. What struck the author in viewing the films was how Ananth captured the minutia and skill involved in each step of the process through the artisan's hand gestures, which recalls anthropologist Tim Ingold's study of the line as being a gesture of a hand and a form of knowledge-making, such as drawing, writing, embroidery or weaving (Ingold, 2008). The materiality of the films conveyed the precision involved in each print process, and they included:

- **Master woodblock carving:** a four-colour design woodblock from the Tharangini archive was traced onto wood and carved. Each colour is a separate block demonstrating how a print is built through different layers.
- **Natural dye printing:** following the intensive manual process of creating a natural dye paste from scratch comes the laborious stone grinding of plant matter, to sieving, printing and steaming.
- **Discharge printing:** this print process bleaches out a dyed ground to create a pattern. The process involves many steps, from paste preparation to printing, steaming and washing. Tharangini has developed a sustainable recipe for this otherwise toxic process.
- **Pigment printing:** the film shows the extraordinary expertise of the artisan's trained eye in preparing ink pads for woodblock printing, stretching the cloth on the print table and printing a perfect length in repeat (details that students overlook)
- **Cultural tour of Bengaluru highlights:** provided a glimpse into everyday life, flower and food markets, temples, street traffic, Parliament House and families strolling in community parks.

At first, gaining competency in woodblock printing was difficult, highlighting the innate tacit knowledge involved in the craft process. Inconsistencies in the handprint confronted some students who rely on digital CAD to instantly smooth out imperfections with the press of a button. Exposing their printing mistakes was highly uncomfortable, as there was no place to hide. Giving agency to the human hand in design has been a breakthrough in their learning. The group was made up of a rich multicultural mix of backgrounds, including Chinese, Indian Vietnamese, Iranian, Greek and Indigenous students. The highlight for them was being able to design their own woodblock (Figure 8). The aim was to design a woodblock that conveyed their relationship to place; the exercise appears simple but is, in fact, quite complex, whereby pragmatic details must be considered for a third party to translate. The communication skills required for this are invaluable, as most fashion and textiles in Australia are produced offshore. The task highlighted student reliance on CAD, where one student, for example, translated traditional hand embroidery from her Greek grandmother's dowry through a digital programme. This resulted in the stitches being regulated and homogenised, losing their human quality; when retracing the design by hand, she found that the print had more authenticity and relationship to the original handcraft (Figure 9). This is critical in the face of an increasing emphasis on digital CAD in education, whereby there is a risk that our sensory relationship (tacit knowledge) with textiles is in danger of disappearing in this visual age of artificial surfaces and media (Lee, 2020).

The exchange of knowledge was reciprocal, as producing a demonstration film on print and natural dye processes was something completely new for Tharangini. Govind and Ananth found that taking time out of their busy schedule to produce the films drew their attention to the complexities and expertise (tacit knowledge) involved in woodblock printing that they take for granted in their daily work routine. The discipline of identifying and disseminating key aspects of the print process has produced a new way of sharing their practice more broadly. The artisans played a key role as protagonists in each film, as their skill and knowledge were brought into focus. Govind reflected that one of the positive

social impacts of this unique Global exchange was how it prompted artisan pride in their work. The student's interest in learning about the studio highlighted to her the value Tharangini offers as an accredited artisan studio of ethical and sustainable practices. The informal class presentations on Zoom impressed upon students their own accountability in working with the crafts of another culture, with Govind observing that students introduced fresh ways of observing by combining colours, patterns and layouts in unexpected ways (Figures 10 and 11). Thus, tangible and intangible knowledge was exchanged between a culturally infused craft and the imagination of young and creative designers. Govind also noted that an exchange of ideas is intangible, often surfacing months later in a team studio meeting when an artisan will refer in great detail to a print that one of the students produced. Likewise, the author has observed students who have participated in the Global Studios show maturity and confidence in other design subjects because of the deeper insight into the social/ethical concerns, people and processes behind textile production (Clifton-Cunningham & Heffer, 2022).



FIGURES 8 AND 9. Student woodblock designs hand carved by a master artisan, artisan names at Tharangini Studio (figure 8). Kat Kovats student woodblock and silkscreen print of grandmother's embroidered scarf, natural and acid dye print (figure 9).

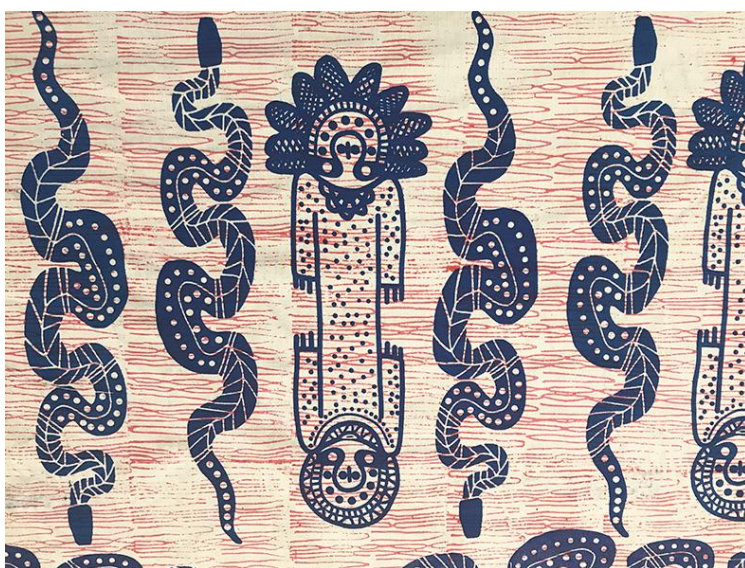


FIGURE 10 and 11. Indigenous UTS student Sharniqua Oxtoby silkscreen print combined with Tharangini texture woodblock (figure 10). Oxtoby silkscreen print combined with Tharangini archival floral woodblock (figure 11).

CONCLUSION

This paper explored new opportunities to disseminate traditional knowledge and craft skills between countries and cultures through an online/on-campus model for teaching and learning. The discussion focused on a virtual global studio exchange between UTS fashion and textile students in Sydney, Australia, and Tharangini, an artisan woodblock studio in Bengaluru, India. The experiment sought to test whether and how tangible and intangible craft knowledge can transfer across cultures and time zones. Over the course of the 12-week workshop, the author observed how weekly Zoom meetings with Director Padmini Govind and her team of artisans created meaningful connections for students. The discussions that unfolded from each session offered students insights into complex social, ethical and sustainable concerns, as complemented by an on-campus print workshop. The combination of Zoom sessions with artisans (translated by Govind) and film demonstrations on woodblock printing imparted deep knowledge onto and cultural meaning into the many steps of the process. The dissemination of craft skills moved beyond a technique learnt on YouTube or the internet (although these also have a place) to a meaningful human and cultural exchange otherwise impossible due to geographical separation.

A deeper understanding of the extraordinary skill and artistry imbued in artisan woodblock printing (intangible knowledge) was gained through haptic hand printing (tangible knowledge) with archival woodblocks. Exchanges of knowledge deepened when students were required to design their own woodblocks that signified their cultural relationship to place, though the artisans found their ideas interesting. Designing a woodblock revealed student reliance on CAD over drawing ability, so this exercise appeared simple but proved complex, revealing the student's lack of understanding of the pragmatic and material considerations required to translate ideas into an artifact for a third party to produce. In an age of increasing digitisation, artisan global exchanges, such as these, are therefore invaluable to teaching material knowledge and tacit knowledge embodied in craftsmanship. In Australia, this is vital, as most fashion and textile production takes place offshore. In turn, Govind observed that the exchange produced new ideas and contemporary approaches to printing for artisans. She reflected that the social impact of the collaboration is both tangible and intangible and can emerge months later in conversation with artisans, recalling design combinations they had seen. The students' genuine interest in the craft of woodblock printing acknowledges the value of artisan skills and knowledge, which builds pride and confidence in a craft that is at risk of disappearing.

In summary, international exchanges such as these contribute to promoting artisan craft more broadly in the Indo-Pacific region. The UTS Mobility Program has acknowledged that the virtual artisan global studio is a creative new pathway for cultural exchange and has encouraged and supported a second iteration in 2024. This hybrid model has the potential to inspire future educators from various countries and disciplines to explore alternative approaches to craft education in the 2020s.

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