

# Cultural Influence in the Digital Age

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**How do we study the cultural impact on urban environments in the digital age? In Charles Renfro's discussion of the influence of film in his work, he notes that, "any film with an edit has a point of view. It can't simply be an index of a place".<sup>1</sup> The tools that we use to capture impressions, whether of culture or space, put their own unique filter on the message. As a novel approach to our study abroad course, we looked to investigate the exclusive use of digital media as a tool for students to convey their experiences.**

**The diversity of contemporary Asian cities, with their dynamic juxtapositions of ancient and modern, provide an astounding array of influences to explore. The course enabled students to visit the cities of Tokyo, Seoul, and Hong Kong, with excursions to nearby areas. Visiting both historic and contemporary works of architecture and urban space, we engaged local universities and design offices, and exposed students to alternative perspectives. Students unfolded these cultural influences by exploring and analyzing urban spaces and their relationship with the societies in which they exist, using primarily digital media. With the proliferation of digital tools and social media, study of culture reflects the interactive nature of these media.**

**Through all of the course elements, we also utilized digital media to give students opportunity to shape their educational focus. In their 2013 book *Rethinking Pedagogy for a Digital Age*, Helen Beetham and Rhona Sharpe note that "Learning is a set of personal and interpersonal activities, deeply rooted in social and cultural contexts. When those contexts change, how people learn changes also".<sup>2</sup> The final component perhaps best highlighted the value of the digital media utilized; students overlaid their digital research (film, photography, and sound recordings) with their peers to map common issues and extrapolate important contemporary themes. The final gallery show exhibits the work of the group through the lens of images and omnibus films revealing contemporary issues.**

## INTRODUCTION

Architecture is influenced by technological, sustainable, and urban issues, but ultimately, it is a product of culture. How do we teach cultural impact on urban environments in the digital age? When students are facing unfamiliar territory and learning about different cultures through experience, there are significant opportunities to explore novel approaches to learning, particularly with digital media. In Charles Renfro's discussion of the influence of film in his work, he notes that, "any film with an edit has a point of view. It can't simply be an index of a place".<sup>3</sup> The tools that we use to capture impressions, whether of culture or space, put their own unique filter on the message. As a novel approach to our study abroad course, we looked to investigate the exclusive use of digital media as a tool for students to convey their experiences. In comparing the student's areas of interest with their work captured in the field, we sought to discover: how would the tool affect the learning outcome?

The diversity of contemporary Asian cities, with their dynamic juxtapositions of ancient and modern, provide an astounding array of influences to explore. The course enabled students to visit the cities of Tokyo, Seoul, and Hong Kong, with excursions to nearby areas. Visiting both historic and contemporary works of architecture and urban space, we engaged local universities and design offices, and exposed students to alternative perspectives. Students unfolded these cultural influences by exploring and analyzing urban spaces and their relationship with the societies in which they exist, using primarily digital media. With the proliferation of digital tools and social media, the study of culture provided an opportunity to explore the interactive learning capabilities of these media.

This required course for architecture students, conducted in three parts, consisted of field study and analysis, a course research paper, and a retrospective exhibit. After a series of introductory seminars, students were asked to select a specific area of investigation for the travel phase. Utilizing digital analysis tools such as film, photography, and sound recordings, they captured their experiences and observations, ranging from interviews, religious ceremonies, cultural performances, to the movement of transit systems. Through the field study phase, we attempted to investigate the potential benefits of



Figure 2. Hong Kong. Esteban Ley.

digital work. Students not only had a platform to share their work, but the immediacy in information sharing of film, images, and social media provided a better capacity for communication and collaboration.

## CONTEXT

The theory of Connectivism postulated by George Siemens “aims to provide a theory that considers how people, organizations, and technology can collaboratively construct knowledge.”<sup>4</sup> As we consider how students learn, it is important to consider the balance between receiving knowledge and constructing it through ‘doing’. Through the travel study course, we aimed to provide knowledge to the students on a daily basis, while allowing them to also unfold their own discoveries. This provided a non-linear, three dimensional learning process, in which they were building upon received knowledge to construct their own impressions.

Digital tools exemplify this new sphere of connected learning. Through the internet, knowledge can be developed and ideas readily shared at any place and time. People can interact online to discuss material, comment on what others have said or uploaded, present their own ideas and information, and collaborate through self-selected networks. “This has led to global connections or networks of like-minded individuals who collaboratively or independently develop and link ideas, skills and ultimately share knowledge which is then

further developed. Knowledge creation has expanded due to the connection between people and ideas through digital technologies.”<sup>5</sup>

In order to design for these connected learning experiences, we must consider how the tools will impact the experience. In their 2013 book *Rethinking Pedagogy for a Digital Age*, Helen Beetham and Rhona Sharpe discuss further implications of digital tools on connected learning.<sup>6</sup> According to the authors, mobile technologies can be used in the design of different types of learning, such as constructivist, situated, and collaborative learning, which are particularly relevant in a travel study course context. Constructivist learning provides a platform for learners to build new concepts through engaging with their physical and social environment. Situated learning allows learners to take a mobile device into an educationally relevant real-world location and learn from that setting. In collaborative learning, mobile devices are an essential means of communication and electronic information sharing for learners in groups outside their educational institution.<sup>7</sup>

## METHODOLOGY

The course sought to engage these theories of learning in the digital age, utilizing digital tools, in order to expand our student’s learning potential for the study abroad course, but also to experiment with the impact of these tools on students’ work. We wanted to surmise if the tool could simply be a tool, or if it would fundamentally shape the outcome of their work. While this is difficult to quantify, we felt that a more qualitative analysis was appropriate in order to preliminarily assess this learning outcome for future development of this course, among others.

In order to compare student’s impressions before and after travel, we asked them to write a brief abstract before travel to summarize their area of primary interest and investigation for the upcoming field study portion of the course. They chose to explore a variety of issues; topics included social and economic influences on living space, pedestrian and transportation networks, green space, public art, and the influence of philosophies and religions on the architecture of the region. We would later return to these abstracts in order to compare their research conclusions and the evolution of their topics.

During the field study portion of the course, we strived to design the experiences based upon the aforementioned pedagogical theories. The idea of connectivism – learning with peers – was an overarching theory which we integrated throughout the course. For example, we established an informal meeting with the students of Korea University of Arts in order for our students to have a dialogue with their students, and share knowledge about each group’s culture and educational experiences. Students shared images, enjoyed food, asked questions, and told stories about their unique experiences in the world of design within their cultures. It provided a venue for students to learn through peer interaction, by discussing contemporary

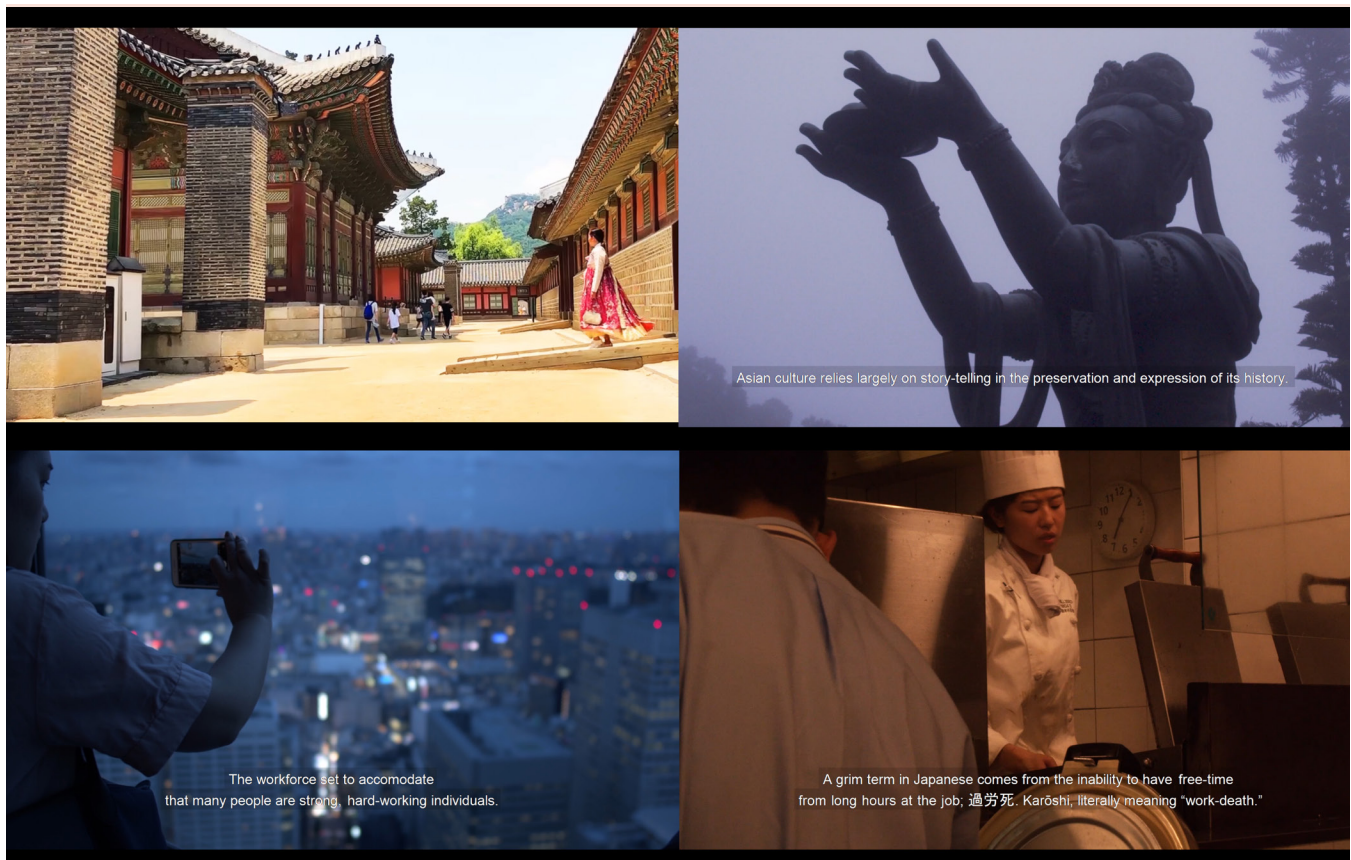


Figure 3. Screen Capture, student films. Zach Elliott, Katrina Klempa.

design issues with another student group outside of our culture, but within the design field.

The course also used digital tools as a platform to share ideas and to construct new knowledge, to highlight the constructivist aspect. The immediacy of information sharing allowed students to have quick exchanges toward this end. Students uploaded two of their most impactful photographs each day to a group app-based platform, which kept an expanding digital log of images and also sparked conversations about the day's discoveries, interactions, and observations. Students were able to see what others were experiencing in real time.

The situated learning aspect was also demonstrated throughout the field study phase. Use of mobile electronic devices enhanced the students' ability to capture the setting of the quick-paced urban locations where we travelled. Because of the potent ability to capture high-quality images, sound, and film footage, students could capture data on the move with their phones. With the connectivity of these devices, students were also able to look up locations and to research sites in situ to further their field learning capabilities. Information sharing with peers was also enhanced by the mobility and connectedness provided by these devices.

The collaborative aspect was best exemplified in the retrospective phase as students came together in small groups to evaluate the work and to share their specialized skills. Students formed teams to conduct the retrospective, with each person focusing on aspects of specific interest to them. While some contributors were interested in developing images, others focused on layering sound in the film, adding text or narrative, or overseeing the overall alignment of issues. The final component perhaps best highlighted the value of the digital media utilized; students overlaid their digital research (film, photography, and sound recordings) with their peers to map common issues and extrapolate important contemporary themes. The final gallery show exhibited the work of the group through the lens of images and omnibus films revealing contemporary issues.

Through all of the course elements, we also utilized digital media to give students the opportunity to shape their own educational focus. Beetham and Sharpe note that "learning is a set of personal and interpersonal activities, deeply rooted in social and cultural contexts. When those contexts change, how people learn changes also."<sup>8</sup> Our goal was to capitalize on the unfamiliar setting in combination with the media to allow students to be shaped by the unknown, but also to form their own experiences in an uninhibited way.

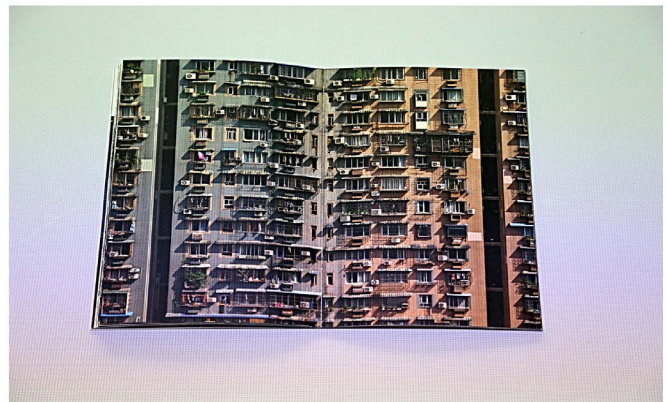
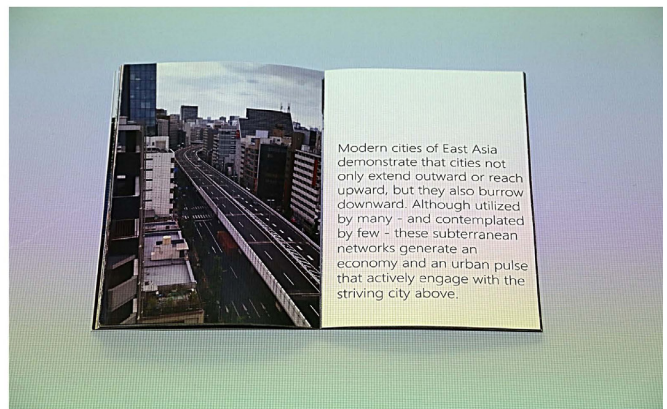
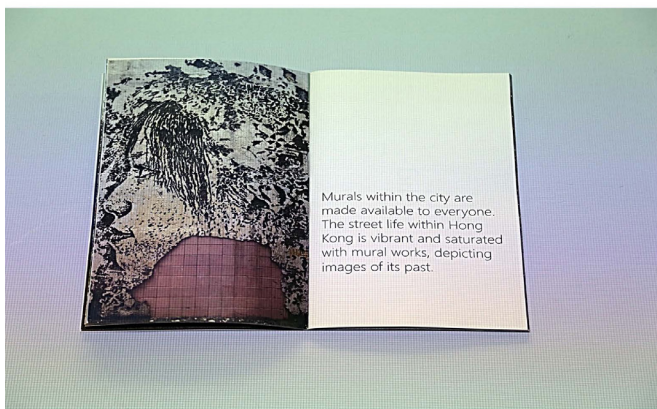
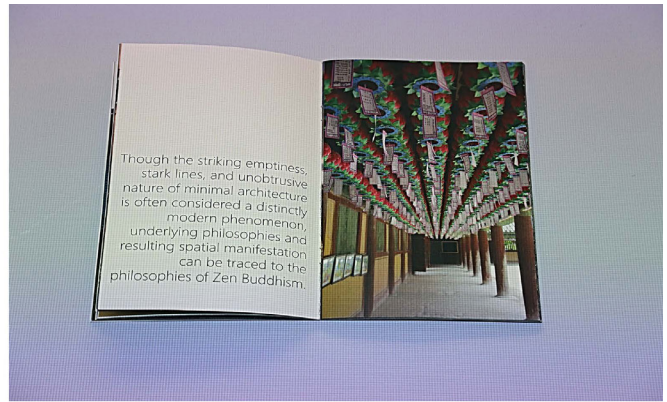


Figure 4. Retrospective Publication. Edited by Seung Ra and Sarah Ra.



Figure 1. City Portraits, Hong Kong. Diego Ley.

### USE OF DIGITAL MEDIA AND OUTCOME

In reviewing the student abstracts and papers post-travel, the extent of the digital tools' influence became apparent. Of the fifteen student participants, three students had a complete change of research topic, while five edited their topic significantly. Students cited the influence of the digital tools as being an important factor in their impressions of the culture and the place. In one example, a student initially proposed to study pop culture. After conducting interviews and capturing film and images of the people and places we visited, she decided to focus on the impact of urban green spaces on the lives of everyday people. Her film expressed the relief and connection to nature that these spaces provide for hardworking urban citizens.

Students utilized photography as a tool to capture various types of cultural messages. Some photographs captured a moment, while some were figure or compositionally oriented, artistic, or more tectonic, for example showing infrastructure. The key outcome was that while the students strived to focus their image making on the topics that they wished to address with their research, the photos revealed other issues that were perhaps subconscious, but which were brought to light with the medium. For example, one student chose to focus on green spaces, but ultimately captured compelling portraits of everyday people inhabiting these spaces.

Film was another medium which greatly impacted student learning and perspective. Students conducted interviews, filmed streetscapes, and captured short scenes of urban life. Again, they seemed to find more than they were looking for. In one instance, a student took footage of the countryside near the Korean Demilitarized Zone, as the bus rolled through the barren landscape. Empty fields lined with razor wire were eventually punctuated with a lonely guard shack, seeming to reflect the spirit of isolation and discontent in this 'in-between' place. Film was necessary to capture the extent of the landscape, but also the intimacy of the small stand, all in one segment. In the post-production phase, students created storyboards and scripts for

their films, in order to edit and refine the message to capture what they had learned.

Digital collage of images for display in the course retrospective reflected the overall curatorial aspect of the digital tools. Students focused on collaging images to tell a story of their experiences as a group. They were digitally curating stories, but in a connected way. By overlaying these images, a new story emerged. In their book on "third space literacies", John Potter and Julian McDougall discuss learning in other contexts: "skilled users of social media know how the media they display alongside each other work together to tell stories in new ways. Placing their work alongside something made by someone else changes the meaning of both texts and makes something new."<sup>9</sup>

While the work was predominantly digital, the written component was designed as a way for students to propose a focus and to reflect on their work while expanding on an area of research. Because some students shifted topics, the writing itself (somewhat ironically) became useful in assessing the influence of digital tools on their work. The writing was an indicator of the non-linear, three dimensional learning process that is enabled by the digital age.<sup>10</sup> The written components of the course became a log of student's shifting impressions, demonstrating this non-linear path of exploration. As the course evolves, the written components could be implemented more as process-oriented tools, while maintaining some of their reflective qualities.

### CONCLUSION

The course was a significant development for the travel abroad approach within the school, and is a part of the larger shift in our curriculum toward full implementation of digital media. By evaluating the impact of these tools on research outcomes, we were able to assess the degree of impact, and to see how we might continue to pursue connectivism in our pedagogical approach for the course. Starkey notes that "It is through connections between parts of a system that knowledge is



Figure 5. Retrospective Exhibition. Curated by Seung Ra and Sarah Ra.

created.”<sup>11</sup> Students will be learning how to participate in a digital-age society where all citizens can contribute to the development of knowledge. “While students will continue to need to learn subject based concepts, skills and methodologies, they will also be making the connections between and across subjects and learning to create knowledge in a digital society.”<sup>12</sup>

Through the field study, students had the opportunity to construct their own knowledge of these cultural influences on the urban environment through digital media. While digital tools were effective in capturing these issues, they struck a message differing from what was initially planned. Students’ experiences evolved in an unanticipated way, but they became something even better; the media shaped their impressions of the place. The tool can’t just be a tool; it necessarily influences our perception, and indeed the entire learning process, expanding what is possible in a rapidly evolving digital world.

#### ENDNOTES

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3. Cimino, Steve, “The Production of Life”, 61.
4. Louise Starkey, *Teaching and Learning in the Digital Age* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 26.
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