To learn is to experience: How our daily interactions with objects, events, the environment and people can be a classroom.

Keyword: experience design, experience, curriculum design, experimental, visual communication, graphic design.

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Abstract: Testing a premise put forth by Nathan Shedroff (2001) that there is always an experience created by an object, an event, the environment and people, this paper is a report for an experimental course at the Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information in Singapore's Nanyang Technological University. Using experience as a form of pedagogical technique in bridging our experience to what could be learned and shared, 144 students are presented with five predetermined categories to choose from, followed by an individual assignment derived from their interpretations of Shedroff's six dimensions of experience. The course is an attempt to add newness to problem-based learning which engages students in contextualized and authentic problems with realistic real-world expectations. By adding our common sensorial and cognitive experiences that we come across everyday as a catalyst for learning and discoveries, the students are also exposed to other learning outcomes--creativity, collaboration, team spirit, artistic appreciation, photography and crafting.

Introduction and background

In an era when camera phones and images are ubiquitous, our society become increasingly visually-saturated. The human experience is a process of constant change which is subjected to redefinitions, relocations, and realignments. The need to incorporate a course which takes into considerations our personal experience is not a new approach. Tom Barone (2000) has suggested that the development of a heightened perception could enable us to critically evaluate the cacophonous messages and abundance of images we experience through the various media that constantly assault our senses. Social scientist Denzin (1978) suggested that our social reality is known and understood as a social production in which human beings are capable of producing our own definitions of situations, shaped and guided by our own behaviour and that of others.

According to Nathan Shedroff, Program Chair, Design MBA Programs at California College of the Arts in San Francisco, California, an effective communication occurs when form and content are contextually engaged in a message carried over time and medium in either digital, physical or natural formats. To him, our experience is a personal connection with the moment and every aspect of living is an experience, whether we are the creators or simply chance participants. Because not all experiences are created equally and they must compete for our attention, a profound reaction is initiated when our beliefs and expectations are confronted (Shedroff, p. 6). Partly, this is partly due to the fact that our experience is constantly shaped by our definitions and interactions with objects, people, event, and ideas that carry symbolic meanings which arise as a result of the interactions.

In today's multimedia and predominantly visually-oriented environment, the importance of visuals as a communication tool has grown and expanded over the years (Goldberg, 1991). The importance of visual communication has grown exponentially especially since the growth of the internet which is regarded a visual medium (Kim & Chung, 2012). Not just visual communication specialists are expected to work in multimedia platforms, ordinary citizens are actively involved in using visuals to communicate. Such an impact coupled with the rapid development of technologies which has led to the converging of media further pushes for mass communication schools to acknowledge and revisit the courses they offer. However, according to Moriatry and Barbatsis (2005), establishing an adequate curriculum has always been a challenge for educators due to the broad and interdisciplinary nature of visual communication which ranges from visual perceptions to how images are visually and cognitively processed through the human eyes and brain (Barry, 2005) to inquiries about visual culture within specific social and cultural dimensions (O'Donnell, 2005).

About Creative Visual Experience and Design

Design pedagogy consists not only of the methods of learning and teaching but also the skills necessary to the practice of design. Using our experience as a platform for learning is the idea behind this reflective and hands-on approach to a visual communication course which recognizes that there is always an experience created by an object, an event, the environment and people we come in contact with. These interacting elements play a part in contributing to our overall experience. The "Creative Visual Experience and Design" course was launched in January 2012 as an attempt to establish an adequate visual communication curriculum at the Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information, Nanyang Technological University in Singapore. The course is based mainly on the premise put forth by Nathan Shedroff by orienting students in five pre-determined categories derived from Shedroff's six dimensions of experience (refer to figure 1) as outlined in his book, Experience Design 1.1: A Manifesto for the design of experiences (p. 4).

The five categories (refer to table 1) are derived from the six dimensions and the justifications of the pre-determined are further elaborated "Group Assignment." There are two components in the course which each student must fulfill: a group and an individual assignment. Depending on the final enrolment, students are divided into groups of 3-5 students per group. Each group must ensure that the following sections are covered/touched upon as their individual assignment is based on a written report with the following components: Introduction (5%), Research components (20%), Observations (20%), Examples (30%), and Interpretation [meaning] (25%).

Categories	No. of groups	No. of 3 students per group	No. of 4 students per group	No. of 5 students per group	Total
A Colorful Experience	6	1	0	5	28
A Designed World	7	4	2	1	25
Repetitive Things	6	1	1	4	27
Things Beautiful	7	0	1	6	34
Minimalistic	7	2	1	4	30
Total number of students enrolled					144

Table 1. The five predetermined categories assigned and number of students grouped per category.

For the duration of 13 weeks, 144 students are exposed to the six dimensions via a 3-hour lecture per week for

up to six weeks. Interspersed within the weeks are groups of students that prepare for their presentations while more groups are exposed to other dimensions in preparing for their upcoming presentations. The class sessions are arranged with lecture for one week followed by group presentations of students in the following week.
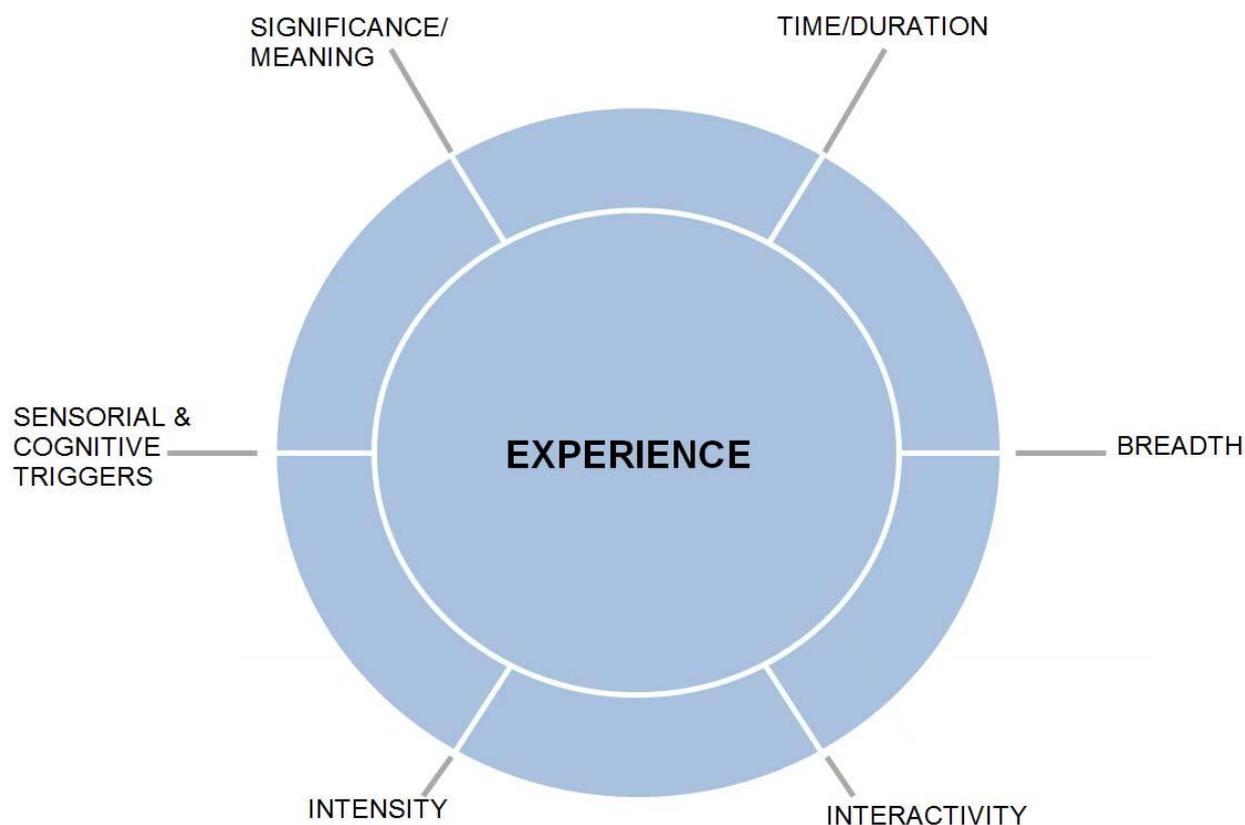

Figure 1. The six dimensions of experience as outlined by Nathan Shedorff.

Group Assignments

In this section, the five predetermined categories which resulted in the varying topics proposed by each group are listed and their findings summarized.

A Colorful Experience

Our most dominant sense, the sight, becomes the trigger for a colourful experience. Colors, as strategic and functional triggers can create reflectivity, visibility and contrast. Colors are successful in enhancing legibility to entice people, communicate concepts or to convey a feeling or emotion (Triedman & Cullen, 2002). Six groups of students (n=28) seek to discover crucial sensorial and cognitive triggers in colors. By exploring various topics such as the public housing estates of Singapore (Housing Development Board), cigars, popular television characters for kids with superheroes dressed in different color outfits, colors that the fashion industry adores, as well as the absence of color, the students highlight how colors are used to reinforce the identity of a company or an entity in ways that bolster a brand's presence. Inadvertently, this also introduces aspects of marketing in which colors have become a commodity that can be used to market things and services in ways that change our perceptions. The absence of colors is explored where food and beverage companies in Singapore daringly use very minimal or neutral colors in their interiors and exteriors to evoke a minimalistic yet sophisticated awe in the minds of their customers. Appealing to our visual and olfactory senses, both natural and artificial colors are

found in foods which affect the way foods are presented and perceived. Below are the number of groups and the selection of topics:

GROUP 1: Colorful HDB flats
GROUP 2: Colorful Cigars
GROUP 3: Colorful Power Rangers
GROUP 4: The Absence of Color
GROUP 5: Colorful Food
GROUP 6: The Colors of Fashion

A Designed World

Historically, design has been part of us. Because of our interactions, our social world consists not objects that have intrinsic meaning but the meaning of objects can also be found in the actions that we take towards them. Csikszentmihalyi (1991) writes that "creating meaning involves bringing order to the contents of the mind by integrating one's actions into a unified flow experience" (p. 216). Because every sensory element can trigger meanings in products, services, event or associated experiences, Shedroff (2001) attests that because these elements that contribute to our experiences are knowable and reproducible, they are also designable. Categorically, there are three types of objects: physical, social, and symbolic (Denzin, 1978). Physical objects are those that may be used in leisure occasions such as balls, bats, craft supplies, and so forth. Social objects are people, including leaders, friends, mothers, and other participants in a program. Symbolic objects are ideas, philosophies, or doctrines which can present possibilities for interactions (Ibid., 1978). In the "Designed World," seven groups of students (n=25) look around their surroundings to discover how categorically, everything is a physical product designed by someone which in turn impact us as we interact with them.

They present designs viewed from humanistic, decorative, occupational and functional angles. They also show how a socially-designed world can make our world a better place to live in from a humanistic point of view and from a decorative angle, how design has enriched people's lives through what is "artsy" to what is "designerly." Operationally or occupationally, spaces such as theme parks, food courts, shopping centers, malls, and more are important places that influence the way we live, work and commute. Finally, they share how daily-designed objects we use have become so entrenched that we take certain designs for granted. This is where the functional aspects of design as opposed to design, merely as decorative elements are further explained. Below are the number of groups and the selection of topics:

GROUP 1: Developmental stages of design from Roman era to the present
GROUP 2: Shopping
GROUP 3: Gardens
GROUP 4: Ikea
GROUP 5: Books Actually (A book store)
GROUP 6: Design for the ladies
GROUP 7: Art versus Design

Repetitive Things

When an experience is interactively engaging, we are presented with opportunities to become more involved. Some of the elements of interaction include the ability to control the experience to the amount of feedback we

get. Whether we are the creator or co-creator of the experience, an experience that adapts to our needs, abilities, interests, and values are also other forms of interactivity. By combining Shedroff's dimension of "intensity" which is about engagement and "interactivity" which is about involvement, the two dimensions become a framework for five groups of students (n=22) to investigate visual patterns found in various things to ascertain how patterns can engage or involve us in a non-technical yet interactive way.

They present their observations in various topics ranging from products, rituals, symbols, fashion magazines and coffee shops. They discuss the elements of design that deals with the elements of design such as size, shape, color, and texture. Our repetitiveness can be found not just in objects we designed and built but in human constructs such as birthdays, weddings, and other rituals that repeat themselves over and over. Other observable patterns are found in objects such as upholstery, rugs, floors, wallpaper, clothing, fabric, tile, mosaics, paintings and more. These are surfaces to compose forms, shapes, and texture for purposes of ostentation as well as structural enhancements. Below are the number of groups and the selection of topics:

GROUP 1: Repetition in Product Design

GROUP 2: Repetition in Rituals

GROUP 3: Repetitive Symbolic Things

GROUP 4: Repetition in Fashion Magazine

GROUP 5: Repetition in Coffee Shops

Things Beautiful

Time influences the flow of how we can experience something and it is a contributive factor for the basis in story and narratives. This is true especially in creating a service-oriented experience where we need to consider the duration of an experience. Unless we consider the larger concept of the human experience, we will miss the opportunities to develop more successful experiences. The timeless concept of beauty has enriched us in many ways. How we decide what is beautiful and our search for beauty in art, design, and architecture become the quest for seven groups of students (n=34) as they delve into things that are considered beautiful, which is arguably both subjective and interpretive. They investigate how beauty as an underlying value, can be understood in our search for perfection. The beauty industries have exploited our insecurities and deliver products, services, environments, and events that connect us at a visceral level. Regardless of the price, it seems, we yearn for beauty not just in ourselves but also in animate and inanimate objects. The automotive manufacturers create objects that are sculptural and functional but yet when they are scratched or outdated, they are regarded as imperfect or defective, hence ugliness, which is the antithesis of beauty. The groups discuss how the pursuit of beauty has enriched us and what the pursuit of beauty has turned us into. Below are the number of groups and the selection of topics:

GROUP 1: Beauty of Death

GROUP 2: Beautiful Pinnacle @ Duxton (condo-styled apartment complex)

GROUP 3: Beauty in Advertisement

GROUP 4: Perfectly Imperfect

GROUP 5: Beauty in Advertisement

GROUP 6: Beauty in General

GROUP 7: Beautiful Asian Women

<u>Minimalistic</u>

In general, we usually do not trust people who are inconsistent, incoherent, unreliable, or those who exhibit multiple personality. Breadth, as defined in Shedroff's dimensions, is about consistency throughout all media, channels, and touch-points. In order to create consistency, a good design must tie together a few elements to create repetitiveness in order to achieve consistency. Basic forms without decoration or simple materials and structures can represent a sense of order. Consistency is probably one of the most cited principles of design. Minimalism as a movement in various forms of art and design can be translated as the work being stripped down to its most fundamental features. A graphic designer who arranges the numerous necessary components to create an impression of extreme simplicity has to ensure that every element and details are absolutely minimized to achieve a maximum effect. If minimalism is characterized by sparseness and simplicity, is the notion of "less is really more?" Eight groups of students (n=32) investigate questions such as "Is being minimalistic important?" and "Is it true that being complicated is easy and being content with lesser is harder to achieve?" Below are the number of groups and the selection of topics:

GROUP 1: Minimalism in Movie

GROUP 2: Minimalism as a Lifestyle Choice

GROUP 3: Minimalistic Logos

GROUP 4: Minimalism in General

GROUP 5: Minimalistic Logos

GROUP 6: Minimalism: Dialogue in the Dark

GROUP 7: Minimalistic Foods

GROUP 8: Minimalism in General

Individual assignment

The individual assignment is a form of a photo ethnographic study which requires the students to photograph 10 images. The inspiration comes from a question developed by mixing the student's group category with four other group categories to form the following question: *"Where is (the category that the student belongs to) being _____ _____to create _____ in a _____ manner."* The purpose of the individual assignment is to bring an idea to life by infusing their group experience to one that is uniquely of the student's own. The students are given the freedom to mix and match the other four different categories which they were once excluded from to form a sentence that makes sense to them. However, they must use the category from their group at the beginning of the sentence. To reduce any misinterpretations, the categories with more than one word, such as the "Colorful Experience," "A Designed World," "Repetitive Things" and "Things Beautiful" are reduced to one single word. For example, a student who belongs in the "Colorful Experience" category could possibly phrase his/her question into a coherently cogent question as:

- Where is COLOR being DESIGNED MINIMALLY to create BEAUTY in a REPETITIVE manner

- Where is COLOR being BEAUTIFULLY REPEATED to create DESIGN in a REPETITIVE manner

- Where is COLOR being MINIMALLY REPEATED to create BEAUTY in a DESIGNED manner

The 10 images must be accompanied by an analytical description for each photo. In order to avoid the images being interpreted wrongly or being too vague and abstract, they must exercise care through the use of narratives, limited to a maximum of 100 words per image. Although they may share repeated observations, much like the topics chosen in the groups, students are assured that repetitions in their observations are

expected but the meaning of their images are contextualized and individualistically interpreted from their own experiences. In that way, even if there are repetitions of topics, every observation is in fact different. They are also allowed to place images next to each other within an image as a way to compare and contrast. The 2-in-1 image will be considered as one. However, they are advised not to re-arrange, arrange or digitally manipulate the image as it is considered altering of reality but they can enhance the clarity of the image using relevant software. Since some students are from different faculties who may not have access to professional or proper equipment, they are allowed to use any image-capturing device, including their own smartphones equipped with cameras. The basic requirement is that the image must be clear and not overly pixelated.

Examples of student analysis of selected individual assignments

In this section, the individual assignments from three students with selected pages from their reports are included with verbatim interpretations. For the purpose of this paper, a colourful experience is chosen to test the "COLOR" category.

Example 1: Where COLOR is DESIGNED BEAUTIFULLY to create MINIMALISM in a REPETITIVE manner

Communication Studies student, Xiu Xian HO focuses mainly on the variation of colors in a supermarket as well as the way it is designed to create visual beauty and forms of minimalism in a repetitive manner. Local supermarkets such as Fair Price and Cold Storage carry an average of 45,000 items and by placing them in a systematic order on their shelves, these supermarkets are able to accommodate massive amount of products, executed via the implementation of color and product categorization where the aspect of repetition is portrayed. The differences in colors and display in each aisle also provide consumers with a unique visual experience while shopping.

The Alluring Entrance

A customer enters a supermarket and is greeted by the prominent display of fruits and vegetables, like that shown in Picture 1. Shades of bright red, green and orange spread out on the table and vegetables arranged in their packages bring one into a world of freshness and crispness of colour and beauty. The rich spread of fruits arranged neatly on the table by its type and colour emphasizes the wealth of options, making one excited to embark on their shopping journey. Moreover, the different colors of the same shades separated by the plastic panel create a picture of minimalism by distinct colours.

Picture 1: Usual display of fruits at the entrance of a supermarket

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Picture 1: usual display of fruits at the entrance of a supermarket.

The Grid Structure

Most commonly sighted and repeated across the supermarket is the orderly and tightly packed arrangement of the products, As seen from Picture 3, placing the rectangular milk cartons side by side generates minimalism by repeated shapes. Also, there is an equal allocation of space to each flavor, as shown from the white milk taking the left, followed by brown chocolate, pink strawberry, yellow banana and lastly green melon. By arranging the milk according to their flavor and the space allocation, this helps to further restrict and create a more distinct grid structure. Hence, clever use of repeated shapes and colours can portray the effect of minimalism even in aspects such as the shelving of products in the supermarket.

Picture 3: Grid structured shelving, the main arrangement of products across the store

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Picture 3: Grid structured shelving, the main arrangement of products across the store (sic).

Vivid Tones

Picture 5 shows a shelf commonly found along the aisles of the personal grooming and washing supplies sections. The shampoos belong to the same brand but are different in the colour of the bottle, mainly in blue, purple, neon pink, neon green, neon yellow and orange. The high saturation of these colours is designed in a way to subconsciously remind consumers of the chemicals used in these products. The items are being placed according to their similar shapes and colours, with each occupying their own row. The different colours also represent the different types of shampoo, and hence aids customers in their shopping experience. Moreover, the grid structured shelving once again ties in with the orderly arrangement supermarkets seek.

Picture 5: Saturated colours in relation to chemicals used in certain products, like that of shampoo above

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Where Colour is Designed Beautifully to Create Minimalism in a Repetitive Manner

The Art of Clean Up

Similarly, in the poultry section, the different meat is arranged according to their cuts. For example, in Picture 7, cuts such as the prime rib, loin rib, sparerib cut and boneless fillet, are put into separate trays. This is alike to the Art of Clean Up, by Swiss artist, Ursus Wehrli, where he takes objects and arranges them by their color, size, shape and type. In this case, the different cuts of meat are sorted in their respective trays, further enhancing the repetition of the shape and shades and tones in each colour of the meat.

Picture 7: The Art of Clean Up via the arrangement of the cuts of meat

An adaptation of The Art of Clean Up by Ursus Wehrli

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Picture 7: The Art of Clean Up via the arrangement of the cuts of meat). An adaptation of the Art of Clean Up by Ursus Wehrli.

Example 2: Where is COLOURS being MINIMALLY REPEATED to create DESIGN in a BEAUTIFUL manner

From a practical standpoint, visual communication deals specifically with a variety of practical media which requires educational exposures in typography, graphics, still and moving images within a framework of cultural, critical, historical, ethical and logistical perspectives (Lester, 2010). However, a longhand approach from Sin Yee LEE, a Sociology major, although is not as sophisticated as one printed by a laser printer, her layout is refreshing as it evokes a hands-on, applied technique reminiscent of a scrapbook. She writes her notes on blue, orange, yellow, pink and yellow Post-It notes and arranges the text which describes the images she shot with an instant camera. Bold colorful stripes are positioned in the middle to separate the different pictures shot at different locations in Singapore. She also underlines some words in her reflection and at times, adding emoticons and the shape of heart, sprinkled at different parts of her statements.

Ministry of Information and Arts Building (MICA) at Clarke Quay Colours are minimally repeated here to communicate a message: This is a <u>unique building!</u> What is it? Oh! It's a MICA! Therefore, colours used here is more than to decorate. It is to guide onlookers and also change the perception of government buildings to be dull and serious colours. Here, bright colourful colours is (sic) used to make a difference in people's perception!
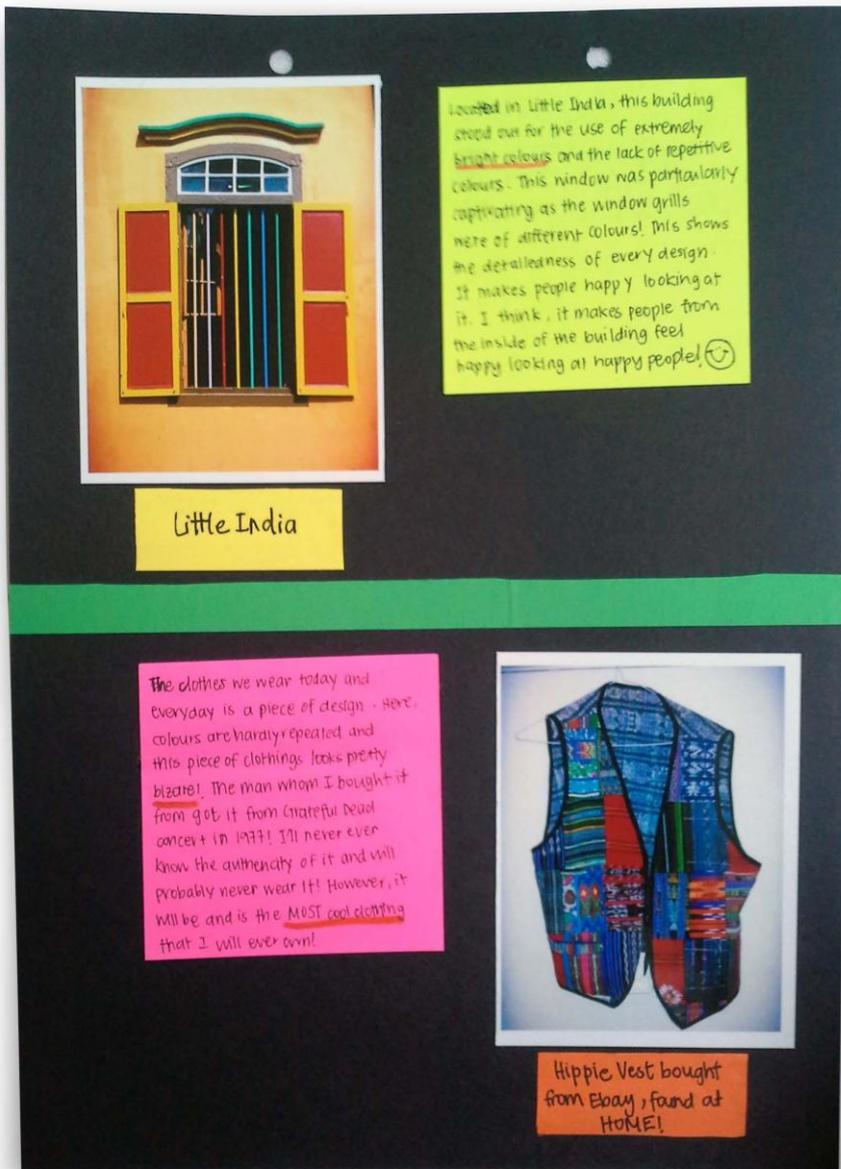
COLOURS is so vibrant here to separate work from play area. Clarke Quay is located near CBD and many young adults will be found there after work. Therefore, colours from their workplace will not be repeated here as this is where working adults can let their hair down and enjoy after a hard day of work! Also, many <u>colours is used to attract the young and the young at heart!</u> Clarke Quay
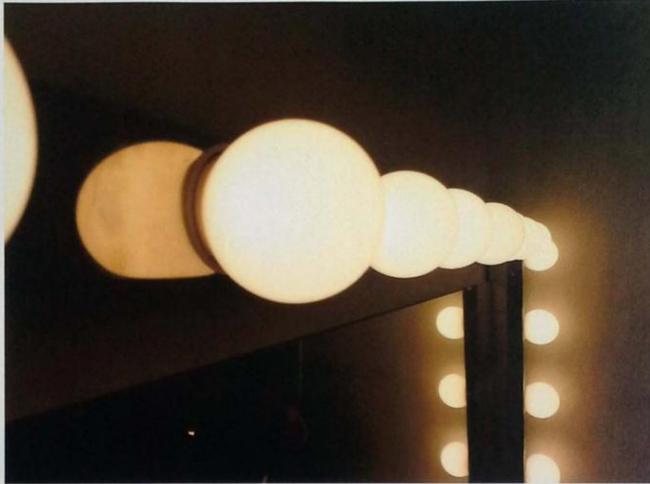
Little India
Located in Little India, this building stood out for the use of extremely <u>bright colours</u> and the lack of repetitive colours. This window was particularly captivating as the window girlls were of different colours! This shows the detailedness (sic) of every design. It makes people happy looking at it. I think, it makes people from the inside of the building feel happy looking at happy people. ☺

The clothes we war today and everyday is a piece of design. Here, colours are hardly repeated and this piece of clothings looks pretty <u>bizare</u>! (sic). The man whom I bought it from got it from Grateful Dead concert in 1977. I'll never ever know the authenticity of it and will probably never wear it. However, it will be and is the <u>MOST cool clothing</u> that I will ever own.
Hippie Vest bought from Ebay, found at HOME! (sic).

<u>Example 3: Where COLOUR is being DESIGNED BEAUTIFULLY MINIMAL to create DESIGN in a REPETITIVE manner</u>

Ee Ping YEOH is a business major who reflects upon everyday things as her theme for her individual assignment. One of the objectives is for students to improve creative thinking by thinking "outside-the-box" and while the assumption that everyone is innately creative, teaching or approach to unleash the students' creative potentials is predicated on the fact that he or she must be curiously interested in "seeing." By paying attention to her surroundings, she engages in a dialog with herself through a qualitative inquiry process and has created opportunities for interpretations. In addition, she experiments with close-up shots which provide judiciously cropped and selected angles to frame her visual narratives.

This photograph shows part of a mirror surrounded by lights. The white lights glowing in a dimmed environment creates a stark contrast between the colours, which makes the spherical light bulbs more distinct in the image. The light bulbs are placed side by side along the border of the mirror which reveals a repetitive pattern of white spheres in a line. As a result, the pattern of light bulbs frames the mirror and the contrast of the white lights in a dark place draws attention to the design of the border and mirror.

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There is only one main colour, brown, that is used. The wood grains on the surface of the tiles appear as variants of the colour brown which give the colours of the tiles a non-uniform appearance. Hence, by creating uniform shapes out of a material of a non-uniform colour and arranging them in an alternating horizontal and vertical pattern, a repetitive design is visualized where the non-uniform colour adds texture to it. The visual effect invoked by the design involves the tiles being placed in a way that breaks the continuous flow of lines, presenting a weave-like appearance.

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This photograph features the skin of a fish and the general colours of the skin are in varied shades of silver and grey which is minimal as the colours originate from the same monochromatic family. The skin of the fish shows recurring and repeated patterns of diamond shapes. Hence, when the use of colours and repetitive patterns come together, it forms the typical appearance of fish skin. This overall design becomes an unmistakable clue for one to identify a fish through the layout of the skin.

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In this photograph of wall-mounted cutleries, it is apparent that there are two main colours present, white and silver. The colours used come from the same monochromatic family which gives the overall appearance a polished and formal feel. This is further accentuated by the shiny surfaces of the cutleries. The cutleries are grouped together to form a unit and this is arranged to form a canvas of cutlery set repetition. As such, the colour scheme and replication of the same unit creates an overall structured design.

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Discussion

It was observed that during class consultations, some students experience some difficulties in finding images that fit and answer all the categories accordingly because they do not necessarily understand how to make the connection between verbal and visual elements. Through consultation sessions, students learned that if they could let go their inhibitions and fears and to trust their intuitions to experience the unknown, they could see many possibilities. Their fear is liberated when students collaborated in groups and realized their individualized assignments towards the end. Collaborations are important, definable as a process of sharing knowledge and experience by interacting with others to maximize the results of an activity as well as expanding the knowledge of the individuals who were collaborating (Poggenpohl, 2004). The author of this paper acknowledges that although the catalyst and intellectual reflections are many and varied, the catalyst for collaborative learning can come from each student's own reflections and observations. The categories are purposefully predetermined as a standard rubric to allow rooms for the students to freely interpret by basing it on their own reflections. The students also learn about various topics in which psychology majors present theoretical models adapted from

their courses and shared them during their presentations to the whole cohort. Other schools such as Art, Design and Media students enlightened their fellow classmates with visual analysis of design principles and presentable layout styles.

The competition between groups especially those within the same category have contributed to the students' motivations. Having multiple groups has allowed each group to interact with other groups for cross-checking purposes. This approach does have some unique advantages and costs. Perhaps the most significant advantage is that from sharing their group presentations, everyone learns from each other, which usually does not occur in a big class. Since the development of the course will extend over several semesters, any refinement and implementation shall be stand-alone phases for evaluation. This is a common approach used in businesses with large projects which means that the course will not be the same from semester to semester (Morrell, et al,1993). However, the continuity from phase to phase will be closely scrutinized by the course lecturer to ensure consistency in achieving the objectives of the course, which essentially is about getting students to "experience." Students have a general understanding of what the assignment expectations are but a considerable emphasis is placed upon ascertaining other details which can contribute to their overall learning experience.

Conclusion

In general, this course is about exploring experiences and how they affect us. The catalysts for intellectual stimulation can come from a variety of sources and our daily experience is a valuable resource to tap into as a form of learning mechanism. According to Nobel Prize winning psychologist Daniel Kahneman, our past experiences is almost entirely determined by two things: how the experiences felt when they were at their peak (best or worst), and how they felt when they ended. Through group presentations, the student's collective experience was shared and as they are exposed to their experiences, they also learn about creativity, collaboration, artistic appreciation, photography and crafting. Every choice we make become enablers for our experiences either in supporting or eroding the meaning which is influenced not just across national boundaries but across age, gender, and other distinctions. They ebb and flow over time and are constantly changing, responding to situations and are influenced by styles, tastes, and trends of our society. Experience is a connection to all aspects of living as it simultaneously helps us to be in the moment. As we make connection and relationships with diverse elements, our experiences can act as a depository of "raw materials" that can contribute to the learning process in a personal and endearing way.

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