

The little differences

Open thoughts to the Triangle Project

By Luc Schaedler

"You know what the funny thing about Europe is? It is the little differences. I mean they got the same shit over there than they got here. Just there it's a little different!"
(John Travolta in "Pulp Fiction")

It is the "little differences" that make the cultural exchange of the *Triangle Project* between the film schools of Shanghai, Stockholm and Zurich both challenging and rewarding at the same time. In the process of becoming aware of and coping with the "little differences" we learn about the *other* culture, their tradition of filmmaking, their teaching methods and their student/teacher relationships etc. and thus begin to see our *own* culture – our ways of doing things – in a different way. I will try to explore the opportunities and problems of this exchange project in my paper.

After the completion of the first cycle, with workshops in Zurich (October 2009), Stockholm (April 2010) and Shanghai (November 2010), it is high time to critically reflect and evaluate the experiences we made. What I'm going to discuss below is not a final analysis, but rather a starting point for a discussion that will and must continue. To me it seems to be this discussion in particular that lies at the very heart of exchange projects like the *Triangle Project* and had also been the main motivation to initiate it in the first place: to go beyond our own routine and confront ourselves with different ways of doing things and learn from this experience.

To begin with I would like to look at the initial aims of the *Triangle Project*. In the announcement for the first workshop in Zurich we stated the main aims to be the "*intercultural exchange for students and teachers*" and "*exploring and learning collaborative forms of cooperation*". Drawing from the experience of the later workshops in Stockholm and Shanghai, I would like to add the following aims and intended positive effects to the two points stated above:

- *International cooperation in research and teaching* (main effect for: schools, teachers)*
- *Exploring new teaching methods* (schools, teachers)
- *Insight into other school models: different student/teacher relationship, educational focus and infrastructure* (schools, teachers, students)
- *Different ways of approaching film: documentary and fiction* (students, teachers)
- *Different ways of watching films and talking about films* (students, teachers) **
- *Building of a personal network* (students, teachers)
- *Strengthening communication skills across language and cultural barriers* (students, teachers)

I see a combination of these aims and intended positive effects of the workshop at play on three different levels. First there is the *school level* (institutional networking, research, teaching methods); second the *teacher level* (personal experience, networking, research, teaching experience) and third the *student level*.

As a freelance teacher, not being an official representative of one of the three participating institutions, the main focus for this article will be the *student-level*: What can the students learn from this experience? How can they profit the most from the exchange workshop? And how can we adapt the *Triangle Project* to make it even more rewarding for them in the future?

Before I will discuss some important aspects of the *Triangle Project* and include some of my suggestions, let me briefly summarize the main features of the previous workshops: Each of them lasted for three weeks, with four students per country (with the exception of the last workshop in Shanghai, where eight Chinese students were talking part). Only the Swedish students took part in all three workshops, whereas the Swiss and the Chinese students only participated in either two or just one. The workshops were held within a period of twelve months between October 2009 and November 2010, one full cycle thus lasting one year. In culturally mixed groups with at least one student from each country, the students were discussing, developing, preparing, producing and presenting their project to the teachers and at the end of the workshop also to invited guests. In the case of Zurich (fiction) and Shanghai (documentary) it was a completed film for each group and in the case of Stockholm a virtual international co-production between the three countries Switzerland, Sweden and China. The working language or *lingua franca* for the communication within the groups was English. In the meetings with the teachers and the plenum at the end we used translators from English to Chinese and vice versa.

Let me now briefly address what I believe to be the most important aspects of the Triangle Project to be discussed and possibly adapted for future workshops:

Full cycle or not:

The initial idea of the *Triangle Project* was for the students to have the option to participate in all three workshops (full cycle), thus getting an insight into the workings of all film schools and also being in the position to be the "leaders" of the workshop in their hometown. In theory this is a nice concept because the students get to know each other better and the second and third workshop can profit from the previously gained experiences and personal relationships. In practice it proved to be more difficult. It seems almost impossible for the schools to integrate the *Triangle Project* in their normal curriculum, be it the Bachelor or the Master courses. As for the students, they like the *idea* of being able to take part in all three workshops, but for different reasons it was impossible for them to do so. Drawing from the experience of the first cycle I would suggest to slow down and do only one workshop a year instead of three.

Duration of the workshops:

So far each workshop lasted for three weeks, including travelling days. Together with getting to know each other and learning a bit about the new city (and culture) the actual working time was limited to two weeks. In my opinion this is way too short. My suggestion would be to extend the duration of the workshop to at least four weeks (if not five), but do it only once a year as mentioned above. Since all schools find it difficult to integrate the workshop in their normal curriculum, I would suggest to discussing an extra-curricular option like a summer (or winter) school.

Number of students:

I found four students of each school to be an ideal number. The total of 12 students from Zurich, Stockholm and Shanghai seems to me the optimal size for a cultural exchange workshop. It is small enough to allow a certain intimacy and to develop a group identity. At the same time it is large enough to guarantee different points of view and to be able to work in smaller groups of three or four.

Culturally mixed groups versus homogeneous groups:

An important feature of the previous workshops was the working in *culturally mixed groups* with at least one student from each school. For the Triangle Project, being a cultural exchange workshop with the idea to collaborate and communicate across cultural and language barriers, this seemed to be obvious. After three workshops I would like to challenge this view and suggest to including other ways of collaboration, too. *Homogeneous groups* – the Swiss, Swedish and Chinese students in one group – have the advantage that communication is much easier. To me it also seems more likely that the dealing with the subject be it documentary or fiction and the actual visual work would be more focused and complete. This would shift the exchange aspect away from *working together* on a day-to-day basis, where a lot of substance seems to be lost in translation, to *watching* and *discussing* the films of the other groups. In the case of Shanghai it would have been very interesting to observe what kind of documentaries the Swiss group would have made as compared to the Chinese and the Swedish groups. Watching the films and discussing the differences, as well as the similarities, may have support the cultural exchange aspect in a very challenging and new way.

Group work versus individual work(s):

Another aspect that takes a similar direction as the previous point is the question of *group work* versus *individual work*. Until now the students have always worked in groups, normally with one project to develop and complete within one workshop. I would also suggest to including other options in future workshops. To confront us with another place and culture, as an individual is very challenging, scary even, yet at the same time very rewarding. This goes both for the individual experience of each person as well as for the discussion that would follow in the plenum. Imagine for example a workshop in Zurich where each student has to go out to the city to document one particular place with the camera and later present his visual impressions to all participants and discuss it with them.

One film versus several films:

The above discussion brings me to another important point. If individual works and discussing them in the plenum were included in future workshops, we would probably have to abandon the idea to have one single product for each group at the end of the workshop. This all depends on where we focus the aspect of cultural exchange. As stated above I do see other options and potential for learning to collaborate and communicate across cultures than actually working together in one group. In the end it is all about learning from each other and this can also be done by discussing and analyzing the films of the other participants.

Watching & discussing films versus doing films:

For film students the producing, shooting and editing of films is certainly the most important. Equally important is the talking about films. Getting a feedback from outsiders is an important, sometimes rewarding but often painful aspect for all

filmmakers. After all we have to present our films to an audience in the end. Drawing from the previous workshops I strongly believe that the watching and discussing of the films of the other participants was not done enough. The students themselves often made this point by the way. Discussing the films of fellow participants may give a better insight into how they work and think than actually working together in a group of four with the pressure to complete a film.

Product versus learning process:

This is certainly one of the most talked about aspects of the Triangle Project, especially with the project still being so young and not yet fully established in each school. Certainly brilliant products at the end of the workshop would be a convincing argument to continue. But by definition a cultural exchange workshop is not product but process oriented. It is all about confronting yourself with something new, about learning from others, about experimenting and about exchanging of ideas. I do see cultural exchange as an ongoing *discourse*. Our means to be part of this discourse is through the medium of film. In other words the learning process happens through working with film, discussing films and exchanging ideas with visual means. So the products (or films) we see and present at the end of the workshop are not *the* product, but an important step in the becoming of a filmmaker or an editor or a producer. Let's look at the films of the same students in a couple of years and we may find the *outcome* of the Triangle Project there.

The specific "culture" of each school:

One of the most interesting aspects of the Triangle workshop for me was the insight I got into the different focal points, methods in teaching and aims of each school. I often got a similar feedback from the students: The Chinese students seemed to like the open, cooperative and casual style of teaching in Zurich and Stockholm, whereas the Swiss students were impressed by the very specific and job-focused education in Sweden. As for the film school in Shanghai its focus on Television and the strong teacher-student relationship that often lasts longer than the student's time in school, was interesting to observe. For future workshops I would suggest to make the students (and the teachers) even more part of the specific culture of each school, in a similar way as it happened in Sweden, where we regularly participated in the morning lectures of one of the professors or in Shanghai where professor Zhan Xin explained the sound studio and his work as sound designer to the Swiss students. His presentation made a strong point that even with a limited infrastructure you can make the best of films!

Preparation and context:

I got the impression that not all students (and teachers) were equally prepared for and aware of the very specific cultural context of the places they visited. I would strongly suggest to putting more effort into preparing for the workshops in the other cities. As preparation for the workshop in Shanghai the Swiss students (and teachers) watched several films about Chinese history, culture and politics and discussed them in the group. In addition to that each student had to read and summarize two articles that gave an overview of the tremendous changes of China within the last 20 years. For the workshop in Sweden we had read several articles about Swedish film history and watched an old (Bergmann), as well as a very recent (Alfredson) film of Sweden. Switzerland, Sweden and China are not the same. The context in which the Triangle workshops are happening is different in each country. In contrast to China, both Sweden and Switzerland are open societies, with a historical, political and cultural discourse that is hardly censored. Which topics the students can touch, be they local or foreign, are

hardly controlled or censored. In my opinion it is crucial that we openly communicate the specific context of each country. I'm absolutely certain that the all students (and teachers) are clever and polite enough to sincerely respect the specific complications and restrictions, but they need to be aware of them in the first place.

Translation and communication (language and culture):

In order for all the above-discussed aspects to be working we completely depend on an *open communication* and *reliable translation*. This goes both for *language* and *culture*. The easier part seems to be the language problem, although we still do need to work on that, too. It makes sense to use English as the *lingua franca* for the Triangle workshops. It is the only language that is taught in all the three countries. The negative part of this decision is that it excludes all students, whose English is not good enough. Although most understand and/or speak English, the skills vary considerably and tend to exclude the ones with less language skills. In the case of Zurich and Stockholm, the Chinese students were often "excluded", whereas in Shanghai the Swedish and Swiss students often felt as "outsiders", because within the groups the Chinese mostly communicated in their language. The only way to improve here is by being aware of the problem and being disciplined to stick to English (within the groups) and at times use the help of reliable translators. As all the workshops clearly showed, the *literal* translation from English to Chinese and vice versa is often not enough. What is needed even more is a *cultural* translation. In order to make the most out of this "intercultural exchange", through which we try to "explore and learn collaborative forms of cooperation" we are in desperate need of such *cultural translators*. Luckily we had a Chinese, or shall I say, Swiss student, who often filled the gap. Long Yun Song is a Chinese national, who grew up in China, but lives, studies and works in Switzerland since almost ten years. He fluently speaks German, English and Chinese and even more than that he is familiar with both cultures. It was very interesting to observe at the workshop in Shanghai that only after Long had arrived in the third week, the accumulated communication problems slowly began to ease. His *cultural translation* for the Swiss and the Chinese students made the workshop even more rewarding for them.

Epilogue:

When I asked Ronnie, one of the Swedish students in Shanghai, what he thought to be the most important aspect of the three workshops he had participated in, he fell silent for a long time, then he nodded and smiled: "*Right now I find it hard to single out one aspect. I couldn't think of any on the spot. But what I'm certain of is that in two, three, maybe five years, when I'm working on a film project, I will be able to say, yes, that's something I've learned in the Triangle Project.*"

* Prof. Hanna Andersson from the Dramatiska Institutet of Stockholm was invited to teach at the University of the Arts in Zurich for one semester (2010)

** Prof. Fang Fang gave an extended lecture on Chinese documentary film in Zurich as part of the first Triangle workshop in Zurich (2009)

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