

Building Bridges and the Ties that Bind: Bringing us together but respecting our differences


 **Simon Mahony UCL**


Exchanges and mutual learning between different cultures requires communication and understanding. We are stronger and better together and working together is the most effective way to advance towards a shared and prosperous future for humanity. This needs to be based on common respect and the development of partnerships with a common understanding of the ways in which we can work together. Education and communication are key to this process.

We live, work, and communicate in an ever-shrinking globalised world. The boundaries between the different aspects of our existence become blurred; the borders between the private and public spheres of our lives overlap and become confused. This became more apparent following the changes in working practice brought about by the pandemic with lockdowns and the move to more working at home. Nevertheless, whether at work or at home, our collaborators are only a phone tap or keyboard click away regardless of their location and time zone. Despite the affordances of the Internet our multicultural and multilingual world still imposes barriers with a tendency to divide us up according to language and location (or more precisely by language and time-zone). We have the illusion of connectivity but often with the focus on the technology rather than the communication.

In person connections usually occur through conferences and other events but otherwise communication is mediated by our online presence, what we see and read online, who we meet and speak to online. To overcome cultural barriers and obstacles we need to reach new audiences and engage beyond our immediate circle, those that we already know and work with. Restricting our cultural perspective restricts our field.

Education is the key to this. We must strive to move beyond our own limited cultural spheres and engage with others to build international partnerships and exchanges to facilitate transcultural discussions. The starting point is within our

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educational programmes and when teaching our students we also teach ourselves and increase our own understanding. Students needed to be guided to explore different cultures, philosophies, and histories, and by doing so become more aware of their positionality within a global context as well as developing sensitivity about others and the differences. Learning leads to a deeper understanding, not only about others but also about ourselves.

This talk draws on two decades of experience in Russell Group universities and builds on a decade of extensive networking with digital humanities centres and researchers in China, including running student workshops there which focus on culture aspects. In addition, I have recently completed a three-year teaching and research contract at a Chinese university which is part of Project 211, Project 985, and the Double First-Class Construction.

Simon Mahony is Professor Emeritus of Digital Humanities at the Department of Information Studies, University College London and Visiting Professor at the Department of Information Management, Peking University.

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