

International Course on Paper Conservation in Latin America. Meeting East. An evaluation after five years

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to disseminate the first conclusions from a poll applied on 2017. The poll was designed by the personnel from the Documentary Heritage Laboratory at the Coordinación Nacional de Conservación Del Patrimonio Cultural (CNCPC) and it was created to assess the first five editions of the "International Course on Paper Conservation in Latin America. Meeting East". (2012–2016). The article addresses the course background: how it began, its content and the people involved. Later, we will talk about the assessment objectives, followed by its methodological approach, a description of the group it was applied to and then intention of the study, the instrumentation sections, some results and initial conclusions.

Keywords

International Course; paper conservation; documentary heritage; assessment; statistics.

The following study arises from the need to analyze the relevance, usefulness and functioning of the "International Course on Paper Conservation in Latin America. Meeting East" in its editions from 2012 to 2016. To serve this purpose, we designed a survey to promote feedback between the organizers and the participants of the course with the goal of recovering expectations, opinions and suggestions, to be later included in the design, planning and development of the subsequent courses.



Course background

In the nineties, an interest arose within the community of documentary heritage conservators in Latin America and the Caribbean about the use of Japanese materials, tools and techniques for the restoration of paper, mainly thanks to publications on the efficacy and safety of those materials over time. Some of the materials and techniques are essential today for the restoration of objects that have a paper support in the West; such as the use of starch and Japanese paper, as well as some techniques of overlays and drying.

In 1997, the restorer Marie Vander Meeren, staff of the Documentary Heritage Conservation Lab at the today Coordinación Nacional de Conservación del Patrimonio Cultural (CNCPC) of the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH), was selected to attend the Japanese Paper Conservation Course (JPC), jointly organized by the Tokyo National Research Institute for Cultural Properties (TNRICP) and the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCRUM). It is because of this experience, that she initiated a process of reflection around the adaptation of said techniques, tools and materials, to the requirements of the paper heritage in Mexico, as well as the need to pass on this knowledge among her colleagues.

In 2010, INAH signed a collaboration agreement with ICCROM through the program for the conservation of cultural heritage in Latin America and the Caribbean (LATAM), where an opportunity to insert projects at a regional level was found. In this way, in 2011 the restorer Marie Vander Meeren organized a seminar with the participation of the JPC coordinator, some conservators from Latin America and Spain chosen for having attended the course taught in Japan, as well as an ICCROM representative. The main objective of that event was to analyze the pertinence of generating, from their different experiences, a program to carry out a course on this topic for Latin America. This is how in 2012 the first edition of the “International Course on Paper Conservation in Latin America. Meeting East” was organized.

The course provides the basic concepts of Japanese materials, tools and techniques for paper conservation, and promotes between the participants, the process of adaptation and implementation of such knowledge to the Latin American context. Among the particular objectives are: to develop links between Japanese and Western paper conservation traditions, to evaluate the possibility of applying tools, materials and techniques to non-Japanese heritage, with particular reference to the Latin American documentary heritage; besides promoting the exchange of experiences in paper conservation among professionals of Latin America and the Caribbean.

It is an intensive program of two and a half weeks, where theory and practice are combined through lectures and practical exercises in the lab, promoting the participation of students¹ and teachers. The content has been divided into two stages. In the first, the Japanese teachers show techniques, tools, materials and the philosophy of the work behind paper conservation studios in Japan. In the second stage, a Hispanic team of conservators is integrated (Mexico, Spain and Argentina) with the objective of sharing their experiences and knowledge in the adaptation of Japanese materials, tools and techniques to be applied in the Hispanic-American context.

The course is aimed at people working on paper conservation, or in restoration studios in Latin America, the Caribbean, Spain and Portugal; as well as teachers involved in training activities in the countries mentioned above. During the five years that the course has taken place, between nine and eleven participants per year were accepted.

¹ The terms student and participant will be used as synonyms.





Figure 1. Lining practice. Imagen: ©CNCPC-INAH.

The institutions involved in the development of the course are the CNCPC, the TNRICP, and the ICCROM. Staff from the Documentary Heritage Conservation Lab at CNCPC, as well as teachers from Japan, Spain² and Argentina³, form the team of teachers of the course.

Background of the assessment

Since the creation of the course in 2011, an evaluation was planned for the end of the fifth edition. With this in mind, in 2017 once the courses of 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015 and 2016 were completed, we proposed to carry out the Evaluation Seminar of the “International Course on Paper Conservation in Latin America. Meeting East”. Its objective was to open a space of discussion on the development, transformation and impact that the course has had after five years of its execution and to generate by-products for the dissemination of the results and conclusions. In 2017, we implemented a series of actions aiming to question the relevance and impact of the topics taught in the course. This information was initially going to be shown and analyzed at the aforementioned seminar that was planned to take place in November 2017 (involving the teams of Japanese and Spanish-American teachers, as well as some former participants). Unfortunately, in September 2017, two earthquakes shook different states of the Mexican Republic, affecting much of the nation’s built and movable heritage. Consequently, both the seminar and the activities prior to its completion were canceled, since all of the emerging actions focused on the rescue of damaged heritage.

² Luis Crespo Arca, conservator responsible for the Department of Music, Sound and Audiovisual Records from the Biblioteca Nacional de España.

³ Florencia Gear, conservator in the Dirección Nacional de Patrimonio y Museos, Cultural Heritage Rescue Department.



Although the evaluation seminar was canceled due to the circumstances described above, for both the organizers and the course collaborators, the evaluation of the LATAM-paper course was an important task to be carried out, so its follow-up was proposed for 2018. The general assessment involved five phases. The first for survey implementation and its analysis. The second sought to obtain contributions about how alumni have applied the knowledge acquired during the course in their daily practice. The third was to gather information from students and teachers in audiovisual formats. The fourth is a self-evaluation of the teachers, their development and transformation during the course's editions, as well as the course in general. Finally, the fifth is the dissemination of the evaluation.

This article focuses only on the first: the survey, where data was collected through a questionnaire, whose development and some results are shown below.

Objectives of the general assessment (study)

- Collect quantitative and qualitative information of the five editions of the course, through a questionnaire applied to the participants who attended from 2012 to 2016.
- Process, organize and analyze the responses of the questionnaires to assess the relevance and impact of the contents of the course.
- Have a general view on whether the knowledge acquired by the students has been transmitted to their peers and how it has been carried out.
- Based on the results of the analysis, to generate proposals or changes to improve the content and development of the course.



Figure 2. Starch preparation with professor Florencia Gear. *Imagen: ©CNCPC-INAH.*

Focus of the study and population⁴

The focus of the evaluation is predominantly quantitative, seeking to determine frequencies and generalities among the participants. The tool was a survey with questions, predominantly, closed, which provided numerical data where the same nomenclature is used and the same detail is provided in the descriptions; with a minimum of open questions in which descriptive answers were requested, aimed at explaining, understanding and / or evaluating the course.

As mentioned above, the study population consisted in all the students who attended the courses taught between 2012 and 2016. In 2012, there were 12 participants; in the 2013-2015, 9 each year; and in 2016, 11 students, giving 50.

Instrumentation

An online questionnaire was designed, with open and multiple-choice questions, which facilitates easy data retrieval and analysis. The platform used was Google Forms, which allows gathering information from users through a personalized survey. The questionnaire data had different levels of coding⁵: from field, where numerical data is collected; list, when the response allowed the selection of more than one option; ranks, when the answer admitted the selection of a single option; and reasoned code, which refers to the answers to open questions, where interpretation categories are assigned (De la Garza, 2018b).

The answers were collected automatically in a spreadsheet that later allowed the generation of graphs from the data of the answers (Google, 2019).

The survey consisted of 44 questions subdivided into five sections:

1. General information of the course participant. This allowed collecting data such as: full name, nationality, sex, age, education, year in which they attended the course, country and institution they represented during the course, institution in which they currently work for and if they continue to perform restoration treatments in documentary heritage with paper support.
2. Tools and materials. This section provided data related to Japanese and Latin American tools and materials such as accessibility, frequency of use, adaptation, and digging further with materials such as starch, and its methods of cooking and extraction.
3. Processes and techniques, both Japanese and Latin American. Recovering data that shows the frequency of use of techniques and processes, like infillings with pulp, materials used to make pulps, reactivated papers, cases of application and function.
4. Dissemination. Questions addressed to know if they have had the possibility to share the knowledge acquired and in what way they have done it.
5. The course after time. Data that allows evaluating the relevance and usefulness of the topics taught in the course and their benefit over time. To know if the participants have made changes in their work dynamic after attending the course, or if they have implemented techniques and materials, among others.

⁴ De la Garza, Patricia (2018a).

⁵ Coding means to assign a number or code to every possible answer in order to count, analyze and/or tabulate.





Figure 3. Flattening. Image: ©CNCPC-INAH.

Results

Although the questionnaire provided valuable information, it is impossible to develop its totality in this article given the large amount of data recovered from the 44 questions and 50 participants. Because of this, only six will be shown, since they are the ones that have determining and interesting results regarding the relevance and impact of the course on the alumni, as well as the dissemination of the knowledge acquired in the course.

1. How often have you adapted tools available in your region as an alternative, to be able to carry out Japanese techniques?

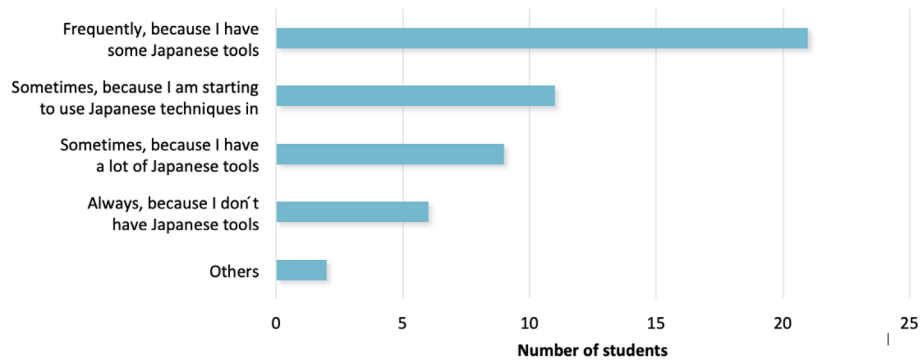
As can be seen in the graph, most of the participants have Japanese tools; however, the need to adapt tools available in their region as alternatives is clear. On the one hand, because they only have “some” of the Japanese tools needed, and on the other hand, because they have started to use Japanese techniques in restoration treatments that involve the use of Japanese tools or an alternative that substitutes them. They also added that the tools are expensive and difficult to import, as mentioned by a former student. Those having to adapt all of the available tools as a substitution, since they do not have any Japanese tools, are in the minority (6).⁶

2. With whom have you had the opportunity to share the knowledge you acquired in the course?

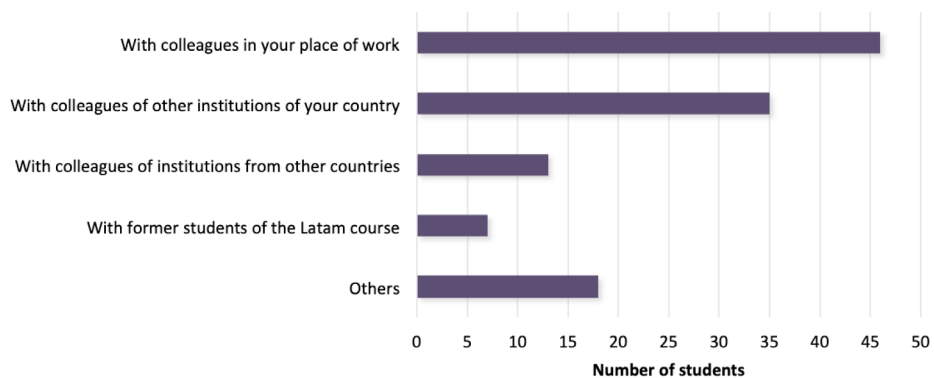
The results of this question show us that the vast majority disseminate the information in their own country, either among peers at their work (46), subordinates (1) or colleagues from other institutions (35). The lowest level of dissemination of knowledge was with colleagues from other countries (13) or with alumni of the course (7), although this kind of communication can be more difficult, in comparison with people closer to them like their colleagues or their subordinates. However, there is dissemination of the knowledge acquired, encouraging the creation of exchange networks and interaction among specialists.⁷

⁶ Others: A) 1: When in the places or projects I work there are no Japanese tools I try to search for alternative or adapt them. B) 1: In Venezuela I had to adapt tools of my country only a few times because the National Library was concerned to acquire them. Now that I am in Ecuador it is more difficult because it costs a lot to import tools and that makes more difficult to acquire them.

⁷ Others: A) 18: Students in a university course, module or workshop. B) 1: Employees I am in charge of. C) 1: Private conservators who are interested in applying conservation techniques for their objects. D) 1: With some colleagues working in other areas, who I have shown how certain techniques are performed. E) 1: With the Asociación de Encuadernadores Artesanales de Argentina.



Graph 1. Answers the question: How often have you adapted tools available in your country in order to carry out Japanese techniques? (question of rank).



Graph 2. Answers the question: With whom have you had the opportunity to share the knowledge acquired in the course? (list question).

3. Have you shared the knowledge acquired during the course through any activity?

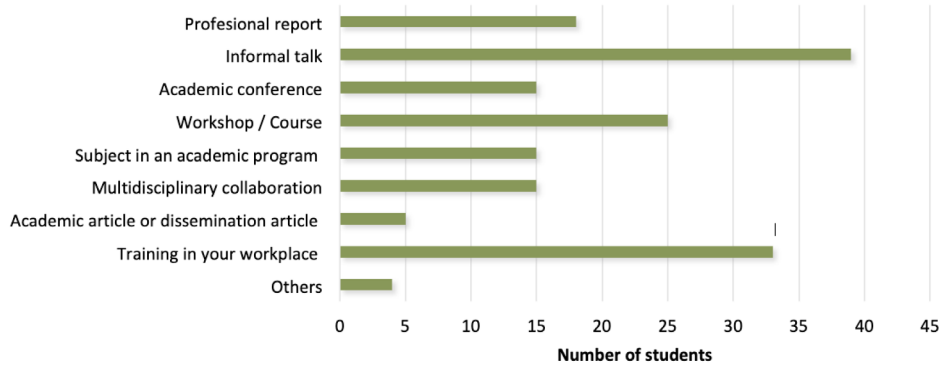
The data in this case, showed that the information given in the course has been disseminated in different ways, including informal talks, workshops or courses, training in work centers and schools, etc. These actions speak favorably of the usefulness of the training and relevance in the field of restoration at a professional and academic level.⁸

4. Rate the relevance of the topics given during the course according to its application in your daily work.

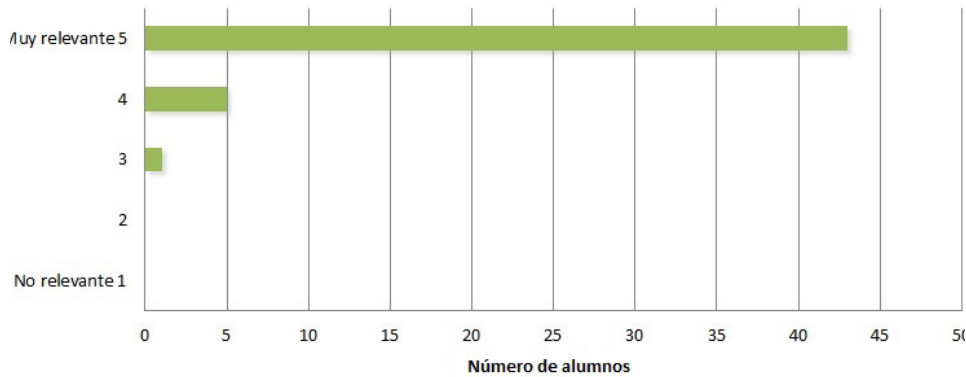
This question was brought up to evaluate if the information given in the course is relevant or if it is necessary to make a thorough revision of the topics to improve the contents. For 43 students the topics given were very relevant; five said they were relevant and only one person answered that it was moderately relevant. This information shows that, in general, the information given is convenient, useful and adequate, in addition to meeting the objectives of the course.

⁸ Others: A) 1: There is a proposal to do a course, but I know I need more practice on the techniques. B) 1: On July 19, 2017, I will be giving an informal talk about tools and materials to take care of your books, in a books fair called Filgua. C) 1: Preparation of a teaching text (in progress). D) 1: I have a talk planned for the Senate's Library and Archive





Graph 3. Answers the question: Have you shared the knowledge acquired in the course in any of the following activities? (list question).



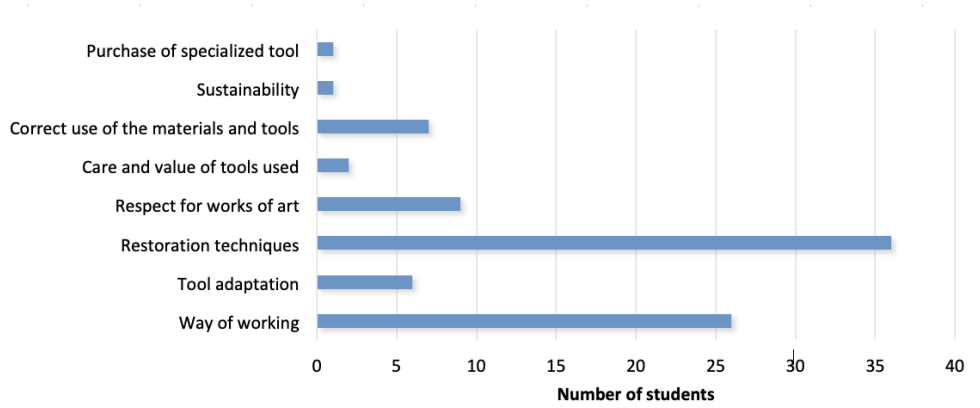
Graph 4. Answers: Please rate the relevance of the subjects taught during the course according to your daily work (rank question).

5. Do you consider that you have made changes in the methodology or dynamics of your work after attending the course? Please mention an example(s).

The totality of the participants responded that they have made changes since they took the course.

What changes?

This type of information is essential to know if the participants, based on the topics given in the course, have made significant changes in their way of working. According to the results, the vast majority of students have changed their work methodology, such as the correct use of tools and materials (7), intervention techniques (36) and tool adaptation (6). This indicates that the subjects taught are assimilated and applied. Some other participants, on the other hand, have made more profound changes, because they radically modified their way of working. An example of this, is the idea of keeping a strict order and cleanliness in the work area; or the respect for the work, which implies carrying out a thorough reasoning prior to the selection of the techniques, materials and tools to be used during conservation treatments, of which special emphasis is made throughout the course. Finally, two people mentioned the purchase of specialized tools and the sustainability that is related to the adaptation of the tool.



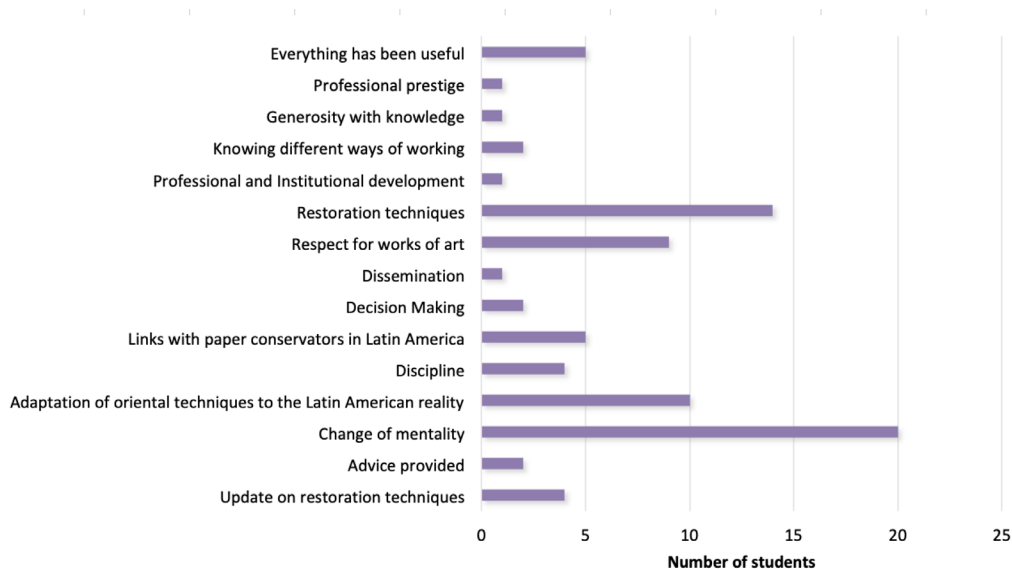
Graph 5. Answers the question: Have you considered making changes in the methodology or dynamics of your work after attending the course? Which changes? (rank question).

6. In your opinion, what has been the most useful thing the course provided for your professional development?

The results to this question are grouped into three categories:

- Change in the methodology of work: although this is not one of the objectives of the course, it is part of the philosophy of work in documentary heritage made with a paper support, where emphasis is placed on order, cleanliness, discipline and organization in every way. Many of the students (20) mentioned a change of mentality in their way of working; nine spoke about respect for the object; and two about decision-making. This seems transcendental since it implies that more than half of the participants have modified and reconsidered their way of working or approaching this kind of heritage, which, from our point of view, indicates that the information that is transmitted in the course has influenced the students significantly.
- Techniques of intervention and adaptation of oriental techniques to the Latin American reality: which are directly related to the general objective of the course “to provide the basic concepts of Japanese materials, tools and techniques for the conservation of paper and to promote among participants the process of adaptation and implementation of such knowledge in the Latin American context “. In this sense, 14 people found it useful to know and apply the intervention techniques taught in the course, ten talked about the adaptation of Eastern techniques to the Latin American reality and four others mentioned the importance of updating them. Data that allows confirmation of the relevance and value of the course contents.
- Other categories mentioned: the creation of links with Latin American colleagues, updating of intervention techniques and professional growth. These points talk about the importance of establishing links with colleagues from Latin American countries and the opportunity to exchange experiences, share and disseminate the knowledge acquired among peers and students, both from their own country and from neighboring countries.





Graph 6. Answers the question: In your opinion, how has the course has been useful for your professional development? (list question).

Conclusions

The analysis of the student's answers has allowed us to obtain information that, although we sensed it after five years of work, it was necessary to confirm with a study that would allow us to support the convenience and usefulness of the course with accurate data. The points to emphasize are the following:

- The study demonstrates that the general objective of the course is fulfilled in its entirety "to provide basic concepts of Japanese materials, tools and techniques for the conservation of paper and promote among participants the process of adaptation and implementation of such knowledge in the Latin American context".
- The importance, usefulness and relevance of the topics given during the course were confirmed, since the students have implemented them in their work when it is required.
- Participants have reassessed their own way of working (to a lesser or greater extent) which has influenced their professional development.
- The course has fostered networks of knowledge exchange and interaction between colleagues and students, in their countries and other regions.
- The participants have disseminated the information learnt in different proportions, so the information has multiplied in this region.
- Although there are some limitations of this instrument, it seems that thanks to the information obtained in this survey we can generate changes to improve the course program.

It is important to mention the relevance of carrying out these kinds of studies, because they allow us to understand the perception and opinions of the participants from the medium to a long term (1 to 5 years), as well as providing information for the design and programming of later courses. In addition, because of the analysis of the questionnaire responses, some changes have been applied in terms of the content and development of the program in order to improve and update the course.

Finally, it is essential to generate another similar analysis after five other editions.

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