EXAMINING THE ROLE OF THE STUDIO ENVIRONMENT WITHIN DESIGN EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT
This paper will examine the role of the design studio as a learning environment within the context of UK design education. The utilization of this resource can have a major influence upon a programmes structure and delivery, but does it really offer students the opportunity for a more enriched learning experience? The author considers this through exploring social learning theories and the phenomenon of studio culture. To support this study, current perspectives and opinions are gained from students studying upon the University of Salford's (BA) Product Design programme. This input has been gathered via questionnaires, module feedback and discussion.

Keywords: studio practice, product design, learning environments, studio culture

1 INTRODUCTION

Practice based design education and the environments in which it is studied often exist on the fringes of our academic communities. The structure and delivery methods of practice based Art & Design subjects do not always align themselves comfortably with the more traditionally academic 'chalk and talk' subjects such as those based in the natural sciences. The reason for this uncomfortable alignment is perhaps that design itself, and the act of designing something is not an 'exact' science. Within design practice we may utilize various theories and methodologies to assist us in working towards an appropriate design solution, but often those truly innovative solutions still require something more. Connecting the seemingly disconnected, and in a process of design alchemy turning information into innovation.

As students we have probably all stared at a blank sheet of paper waiting for inspiration to strike, and frustratingly questioned where good ideas actually come from? Now, as grown up's we have greater insights, and an understanding that design and the act of designing is really a social and cultural process. We recognize that innovations are made as much through our understanding or interpretation of interactions between people, places and things, as they are through an individual's raw talent or enthusiasm. The role we have as educators is to harness our student's raw talent, and take it through a journey of development in skills, knowledge, understanding and awareness. The journey requires the right sort of educational experience, from appropriate staffing and curriculum content, to the nature of the learning environments we inhabit, in facilitating the learning experience of students throughout their time in education.

Historically the design studio format has produced many interpretations, but the notion of some kind of studio space for students to work in has in most cases remained a constant within UK design education. However, as many institutions face increasing

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financial pressures, the dismantling of dedicated design studio space's begins to look an attractive option in reducing resources costs. It's a fact that dedicated space is expensive, pool or shared room space allocated via a centralized booking system is financially a far more cost effective mode of operation for our institutions to employ. In addition to this, few would argue that student's expectations of a higher education experience is different from that of even ten years ago, and that their lifestyles away from study seem increasingly varied and complex. These changing realities may now prompt us all to consider the learning cultures of our programmes and the current effectiveness of the use of our learning resources, such as the design studio environment. Is it worth the costs involved, and does it provide significant learning benefits to students? Exploring this more thoroughly now, may provide useful intelligence upon any future plans for our programmes structure, delivery and subsequent student learning experience.

2 HISTORY OF THE DESIGN STUDIO WITHIN EDUCATION

Design studio practice as part of an educational experience has its beginnings in the Arts Schools of France from as early as the mid 1700's. The architectural design studio emerged as a new form of educational experience within Schools during this period. The Schools provided practice-based study that encouraged discussion and debate with their professors, in addition to theoretical and technical lectures. Some Schools also supplemented students learning with part time employment in commercial practices. This non-traditional 'semi academic' approach was in many ways aligned to the cultural and commercial needs of the period. Similar practices were then followed in American Architectural education and with the rise of mass production in the early 20th Century the role of designer and the requirement for specialist design education was further established across Europe. Walter Gropious *(see Green & Bonollo)* director of the Bauhaus School established in Germany 1919 insisted that:

The school should be absorbed into the studio and that the manner of teaching should arise from its character, that is, the studio should not be adjunct of the other teaching programmes. On the contrary, all the teaching programmes should exist only to support the studio and the design problems it is working on, reflecting the reality of professional practice, which is entirely driven by the needs of the project [1].

This structure firmly placed the activities of the studio at the heart of design education, with all other subjects and study upon the programme serving to compliment the design activity and not be independent of it. For many design educators today the practical design activities of the studio are still regarded as the hub of a rigorous and dynamic design education experience with all other modules upon programmes aligning to it. As Maitland describes *(see Green & Bonollo)* the studio is not just a space marked *studio*; it is a way of thinking and learning [2]. Further to this Green & Bonollo describe the studio as: bringing together disparate thinking into a forum of discussion and ideas exchange. Students experience the transient nature of the studio, ie the struggle for understanding the requirement: the inclusion of features in a product; the expression of cultural and regional identity; and the appropriateness of a design solution [3].

These notions of the design studio as being more than just a room to study in, but as a place that offers students an experience and learning culture all of its own, appears to be very attractive to staff and students alike. The design studio and its culture, has in the main been retained as an anticipated part of a design education to this day.

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3 STUDIO CULTURE

The physical make up of a contemporary design studio is usually quite basic, some chairs, tables, perhaps a scattering of technology and somewhere to pin work up. However, if this is a dedicated programme space, the staff and students that inhabit it can over time embellish it with a sense of personality and character, student's claiming desks as their own and staff adapting the space to meet their own teaching delivery needs, etc. Such investment and customisation leads to a sense of ownership of the space itself, it is at this point that a studio learning 'culture' can begin to develop amongst the student body. The environment has the potential to now transcend its physical make-up of chairs and tables simply offering a place to study. It can provide student groups with a sense of identity, value and offer the opportunity for confident self-expression of individuals and whole peer groups. The studio can become a melting pot for ideas and opinions, encouraging autonomous learning to develop.

In addition to the very real sense of ownership that the studio appears to produce amongst both staff and students, the studio also appears to carry with it many romantic notions of what can be a slightly introverted and mildly eccentric culture. Stories of the lone student's struggle, working long hours into the night producing the perfect design to blow away their tutor and peers at the next day's crit are commonplace. It is this type of dedication to your work, leaving you hungry, tired and smelly that is seen as integral to the journey of a design education. But at the risk of perpetuating these romantic ideals of design studio culture, there does appear to be great benefits in supporting this mode of learning, and many tutors believe that it does possess the potential to provide some of the key ingredients required to achieve a deep learning experience. Some established views regarding the benefits of design studio culture are that: The nature of the studio as a learning environment appears to clearly promote the opportunity for enhanced communication between both peers and programme staff, resulting in a richer and deeper learning dialogue being established. It clearly enables good student practice to be endorsed transparently and shared amongst the peer group. Design studio activities can also provide a far more realistic experience of the types of interaction and interpersonal communications that exist within the day-to-day business of commercial design practice. These potential benefits will of course always find limitations within the context of a programmes management and individual tutor's delivery methods.

A place such as the studio, where interactions and experiences can be either structured or unstructured but continue to contribute towards learning seems to be the ideal environment for reflection and deep learning to occur. The studio environment may be locked into reflective practice because it's not always a timed event, like a formal lecture or computer lab session. It can definitely be thought of as an experiential process of learning through 'taking part'.

4 SOCIAL AND SITUATED LEARNING

To further develop an understanding of the studio's learning culture it may be appropriate to consider the studio as a social learning environment. This aligns well with social learning theories suggesting that people learn from observing the activities of other people. Learning would be exceedingly laborious, not to mention hazardous, if people had to rely solely on the effects of their own actions to inform them what to do. Fortunately, most human behaviour is learnt observationally through modelling: from observing others one forms an idea of how new behaviours are performed, and on later occasions this coded information serves as a guide for action [4]. This is where studio activities should provide really useful learning experiences, as it provides opportunities

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for shared observations of good and bad practice through the student's interactions with each other. The studio tutor has the opportunity to encourage situations, where all present can benefit in the learning and discovery that is taking place.

Notions of 'Situated Learning' are discussed by Lave and Wenger. This theory places the learning experience within the real world of people and situations, and not just being a process of applying a method or conceptual structure to a specific activity [5]. They consider what kinds of social engagements provide the proper context for learning to take place. If we consider the design studio as an environment that can support the notion of situated learning and provide students with their own 'communities of practice' then further ideas from Lave and Wenger become recognisable as inherent and extremely beneficial design studio practice. The delivery and structure of many design programmes are effectively creating their own communities of practice. If the studio is home to multiple year groups of students and a level of interaction between year groups occurs the communities learning culture is effectively perpetuated, as each group of students learns the studio cultural norms from the other. Embedding this practice generation after generation in a process Wenger has called 'legitimate peripheral participation'.

Learners inevitably participate in communities of practitioners and…the mastery of knowledge and skill requires newcomers to move towards full participation in the socio-cultural practices of a community. Legitimate peripheral participation provides a way to speak about the relationships between newcomers and old-timers, and about activities, identities, artefacts and communities of knowledge and practice. A person's intentions to learn are engaged and the meaning of learning is configured through the process of becoming a full participant in a socio-cultural practice [6]. This idea focuses learning not as a solely individual experience, but here learning is in the relationships between people. Learning is in the conditions that bring people together and organize a point of contact that allows for particular pieces of information to take on relevance [7]. This is what the design studio really appears to provide. Situated learning is not so much a structured activity that is completely controlled, it happens over time as a consequence of being exposed to a community of practice, as the newcomer adopts the culture and therefore the learning culture and knowledge. The learning that is experienced is therefore not simply the property of an individual, gained as a result of a set learning activity, but a more holistic learning experience within the context of a shared community.

5 PRODUCT DESIGN AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SALFORD

Amongst the staff within our own Product Design Programme at the University of Salford the design studio is still considered to be the home of the programme. Despite students spending increasing hours in the computer labs, the studio remains 'for now' their communal space. It may not always be where they spend the most time, but it is still the place where they start and end most days at University. From a staff perspective the studio is what provides the opportunity for a 'community of practice' to be built, it is the place to work in and share common interests. It can be a place for structured learning and team activities or it can provide a base for independent study and reflective practice. As the Programme Leader and still an active studio tutor I was very interested to uncover if these staff perceptions were shared by our students. General data was gathered from sources such as Module Evaluative Questionnaires and the recorded feedback given via our Staff Student Consultative Meetings. In addition to this data a more focused questionnaire was produced and distributed to all 98 students upon the

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programme. The questionnaire asked specific questions related to their perception of the studio and the merits of employing a studio based approach to teaching delivery. I also wished to gain insight into how important they felt ownership of this space was as part of their overall learning experience upon the programme. The questionnaire produced a good response rate of approximately 70%.

The responses that were received broadly aligned with our staff views. However the studios importance as a place for simply meeting up and having lunch appears equally high in the student perception of its value and importance as part of the programme. This at least evidences the feeling of ownership towards the studio, and some sense of a community existence. Our studio is often untidy but still remarkably draws envious attention and interest from other staff, students and visitors. Student feedback indicates that the majority of our students feel the studio provides them with a strong sense of identity and offers them a presence within the institution, perhaps something not afforded to students studying upon some other programmes. Again from student feedback their subscription to the idea of a design studio as being an integral part of the learning experience has demonstrated an influence at the point of selecting their preferred institution. Citing a good vibrant studio as being what many looked for when making programme selections.

The nature of work our students undertake within the design studio is largely independent practice based projects, although more structured group exercises may also form part of their project work. Programme tutors often provide an ambient presence within the studio, encouraging a culture of discussion and debate as well as conducting more formal tutorial and seminar sessions where the teaching and learning experience is more directed. Practical design projects are used as the primary vehicle by which student's will gain their design skills, knowledge and understanding. The potential for breadth and scope within a design project makes it an extremely useful learning tool to employ within our studio environment. It can be used to combine the major aspects of design education, the skills, the language and the approach to problems. Design projects enable these key aspects to be linked together, more effectively taught indirectly through experience than taught directly through explanation [8].

Although studio projects throughout the programme may be structured in a similar way, following the basic design process of research, ideas generation, concept development and presentation. Each project attempts to place emphasis on different aspects of this process, thus enabling the communication of specific theories or strategies as part of the modules learning requirements. Our studio practice should ideally accommodate this variety of needs, as the module focus changes. However, in providing a studio space that is largely given over to students own desk space's there is little real flexibility in radically changing the environment to suit the needs of specific activities within modules. At present our studio's predominant value appears to be that it communicates a sense of investment in our students, offering the opportunity of being part of a culture and a community with a strong identity.

6 CONCLUDING REMARKS

The design studio is certainly a place that has the capacity to inspire, and enable programme staff to engage with students in a uniquely intense learning experience. At its best, it can support and encourage a culture of reflection and deep learning, adding significant value to a student's educational journey. At its worst, the studio environment can become simply an uninspiring collection of furniture, ill maintained and absent of ownership its potential to provide real benefit is largely lost. These are extreme

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examples, but encouraging the likely hood of the former scenario is presumably desirable, and achieving this 'ideal' may require a more developed approach to managing the studio environment. Enabling the correct interactions to take place and therefore providing situations and scenarios in which students learning can develop successfully. Further study in this area of investigation will now focus on exploring the alignments between current studio activities and programme curriculum.

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