

TEACHING SENSE OF OWNERSHIP THROUGH DESIGN: A CASE STUDY OF DISCOVERY-BASED OUTCOMES IN STUDIO ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract

How do you teach a sense of ownership and self-initiative to young students with limited life experience while accomplishing core educational goals? Many design programs are faced with this dilemma at the transition from second- to third-year studio - a project-based learning environment under the guidance of expert eyes. This study outlines a clear step-by-step method of cultivating sense of ownership and self-initiative in the context of studio learning.

During a one-semester period, students were asked to engage with an unfamiliar location within their reach and investigate its various social, cultural, historic, physical and other dimensions. The central tenet of this method is the absence of specific predetermined outcomes. The final product of their study is a summary creation conceived, shaped, and presented as a testament to the discoveries gained based on the students' initiatives and self-investment.

The end results vary widely in scope, form, and conceptual boundaries, but all of them demonstrated a higher degree of maturity from the point of inception. None could be accomplished without their rigorous participation. By their own admission, the students said they had grown their initial apprehension of the new and unknown into an enlightening engagement with their world and its deeper understanding. Moreover, they were persuaded to show how their initiative and sense of ownership connect to their personal and professional application.

The process of creating discovery-based outcomes generates both infinite possibilities and contextually grounded creations. This case study outlines a distinct method to help develop a sense of ownership and self-initiative for young students, while still serving the objectives of a core design study.

Keywords: ownership, design, studio, discovery, pedagogy, "sense of ownership"

1 INTRODUCTION

Teaching, a discipline difficult to quantify, is always a challenging task. However, teaching design in the Middle East poses some specific challenges. Prior to entering the American University of Sharjah, a leading regional institution, students' educational experience in many ways is structured around regimented instruction with restrictive guidelines and borders to observe. This background is at times helpful when one needs to introduce essential rules, processes and principles. However after building in-depth foundational skills, there is an expectation to move beyond procedural, tightly restricted pedagogical path into a more self-driven, self-initiating experience. To be an effective professional all design students are encouraged to embrace creativity, individuality and self-reliance. The shift from more restricted to self-guiding experience is expected to occur at the beginning of the Junior year. The following outlined method was already tested in two consecutive years and a third one underway, with very encouraging outcomes.

2 PURPOSE

A clear mandate for a design program is to begin the process of growing students' design expertise. The range and scope of various methods are well identified in the discipline already [1]. However in addition to key design proficiencies there is a clear need for introducing other,

softer skills into the pedagogy of design studio. This methodology imposes a requirement of active participation in the course pedagogy and most importantly encouraging the build up of sense of ownership and self-initiative. It is also very important to lead into that transition with incremental and reasonably easy path to follow. Furthermore, every step builds on the previous one, but none leaps ahead so far that could cause paralysis and inaction. One of the key attributes of the process is the gradual arrival at the final outcome, without any preconceived notion of what that might be. That in essence defines the method of discovery-based outcomes. A degree of confusion and perhaps sense of being lost is an expected side effect. However, this tension has proven, practically beneficial, as to provide a steady challenge which helps mobilize, students' own abilities and resources. Historically, all of them have risen to those challenges and concluded at the delivery and presentation of insightful and holistically developed outcomes. As a result, the students experience the phenomenon of self-reliance and active interaction within their world. The core of design education relies on studio based teacher-student interaction. The studio is an educational environment where students learn through project-based experiences.

3 METHODOLOGY

The core of the this process of engagement requires students to investigate a place of their choosing with the only prerequisite to be unfamiliar, but interesting to them with ability for unrestricted access. While the outcomes are undefined in advance, the process is very thorough and within students' reach. In its essence, this methodology relies on the well-established theory of involvement through activities connecting people, places and artifacts [2]. More specifically students are required to keep an open mind while being attentive and curious. The assignment is divided in two parts and develops in the course of sixteen-week long semester. Both parts build on each other as the first requires a thorough understanding and representation of a place of profession and the second requires a focused investigation of a single professional from that place and representing his/her narrative in a chosen form. No outcome is known or even pre-planned. All output is an outgrowth of the continuous process of inquiry and engagement. The degree of freedom and burden of self-initiative typically becomes a moment of great anxiety and even fear of what lays ahead.

"when the project was introduced it sounded scary because this time I had to go out and meet unknown people and discover a place. I did not know this country well enough even though I have been in this country for so long."

is what a student stated. However, relatively soon they become deeply engaged by the challenge of unpacking their chosen place in depth and scope.

The development follows distinct stages, which include: investigation, discovery, synthesis, definition and representation.

3.1 Investigation

The most discomfoting phase for students is when they are asked to make a choice on their own with the implication that it will be crucial to their final outputs. Their most the immediate reaction is, as expected - a large dose of apprehension. This is typically the first educational experience where, in a substantial way, they have to make choices, which they have to rigorously defend. To assure that they ease their way in the process, they are encouraged to select three different place choices. A brief familiarization with those choices, and in consultation with their instructors, they identify the most promising one both in potential and personal affinity. The initial phase of investigation requires lengthy presence in the chosen place as well as thorough documentation and absorption of impressions and contemplations. There is the requirement of using multiple modalities: direct observation, note taking, audio recordings, photography and video documentation, and observational sketching. Furthermore, they must engage the professionals and all present at the location, to gain personal insights of all aspects of the place. No detail is unimportant or insignificant at this stage. Within two to three weeks they create a thorough record of what is important and what is secondary to their place of choice. This becomes their first independent activity linking the classroom and the world in which they live. A key outcome of this

stage is that trepidation is gradually replaced with growing curiosity and sense of agency. A crucial aspect of this stage is also transforming their passive observation into an active investigative state of mind, absorbing not only new facts and appearances but detecting peculiarities and curious factoids. They are advised to make continuous connections between place, people and actions whether those elements are working in unison or contributing to perpetual contradictions. This is what a student reflected about this stage:

“Going to this place and “looking” around was a very unique experience; I didn’t realize that so many things could happen at such a small and insignificant place.”

3.2 Discovery

As they gain in-depth knowledge of the process students begin to identify/discover specific peculiarity, uniqueness, and/or special characteristic springing from the understanding they have gained. The discovery phase aims to define a value, key characteristic or simply a unique oddity, which separates this from many like places. The sense of discovery also serves as catalyst for even deeper investigation and inquiry. One typical outcome is the awakening to the complexity and richness of the world around the students. One student clearly expressed this sentiment:

“Initially when the project was proposed, I didn’t know where to begin. But by visiting the place repeatedly I gathered information and started to notice things that were not apparent before. What seemed to be a confusing and messy system suddenly became clear to me. I started to make sense of the process that went on in there and all the organizations that preceded it.”

While, discoveries could be multifaceted, the gained awareness and understanding leads to further definition of the values and meaning of the place. In many instances they identified multiple values and conceptual nuggets, which identify their chosen place as intriguing and engaging. As a result a single, most prominent aspect is discerned and perpetually developed further.

3.3 Synthesis

As a key quality is identified, students are asked to consider meaning, message, audience and ultimately the potential efficacy of the final outcome. There is no one specified, so they must first define the standard by which they wish to be judged. Not all are able to easily arrive at the demanded clarity. Some struggles are exemplified in the words of another student:

“In my project, the main struggle was finding a concept to communicate about the place.”

However, they must synthesize their intent in a form of design brief. The brief is also treated as statement of intent where they declare what they wish to communicate and to whom. All actions to this moment are self-driven and have informed everything else that follows. The sequential increments of the investigative process help students to overcome many apprehensions and concerns of how would they manage. At the Syntheses stage they begin to consider not only the message and its appropriateness but also possibility for form making and final delivery. All considerations become more tangible and specific. While the brief must be thoroughly defined, it continues to evolve as they their prospective becomes more nuanced and refined. Furthermore, since they decide what must be made and communicated, while considering their limitations, they are allowed to fine-tune their brief and create outcome, which reflects its core intent. The key pedagogy of this moment is to convey the tight linkage between intent and outcome.

3.4 Definition

This is the stage where a clear link is established between the intent of the outcome and its specific final form. All aspects of message delivery, vehicle of delivery and appropriateness for its audience are considered and matched with a proposal for final. At this stage they are fully absorbed and have developed a personal investment in the final result. In many instances they take their outcomes as not only communications but agents for change. After a thorough

consideration of road ahead they identify the desired ends and ways of achieve them.

3.4 Representation

The final stage engages a process of artifact production reflecting the self-defined student parameters. The output varies and its only constrained is to faithfully and effectively represent the clear definitions of value articulated in the design brief. Students choose medium, method of completion and mode of presentation, as their final outcome might include one or multiple media or artifacts. Much of the content included in the final outcome production is derived out of the substantial body of research material students have generated to date. In a way the final outcome is grounded in the point of origin where as it becomes clear how intermediate decisions have influenced the following increments. The final outcome is judged based on its intent and efficacy of delivery.

It is well-established practice in design education to generate a process book along with the final outcome [3]. In addition to final presentation of outcome artifact, students are required to produce one where they outline their particular path of development and the relevant choices they made. It concludes with a short reflective essay where they discuss the process, their experience and their conclusions and lessons learned. The process book becomes a very useful tool to summarize experience, reflect on revelatory moments and dead end pursuits, as well as identifies possibilities for future growth.

4 FINDINGS

One of the key shifts that occur in the outlined third year studio is the establishment of close relationship between meaning, content, context, audience and form. More specifically the physical confines of the studio are well connected to the physical realities of the world from which design springs and in which is situated. The process of engaging a specific place to serve the needs of design education supports several aspects of the design education. It allows for a reliable opportunity to promote self-initiative and sense of ownership. Furthermore, it offers a suitable platform for exploring realities of the world and the communication needs that arise out of them. Initially, all students begin the journey through the course with apprehension and even confusion of how to engage with something so self-driven that they have to be fully in charge. At the beginning of the course, students are introduced to a new experience of educational engagement, one without much constraints and a distinct burden of self-reliance and self-initiative. For most of them quickly begins to be a source of apprehension and even a degree of confusion. Admittedly, they all understand the specifics of the assignment but are initially at a lost how to engage it as they are accustomed to perceive results before engaging process. The place translation framework clearly reverses that construct in their mind, as they are required to lead rather than just follow. More specifically they are required to select a place interesting to them, and that nearly instantly personalizes their investment. It is clear that no mater how detailed the explanation is there will be some degree of blur about the final outcomes. The phase of selecting a place and committing to it, has proven to be the most difficult moment in the whole process. Many students quickly understand that there are consequences for their choices, which will either help them throughout their semester-long journey or impede their progress.

As the process of investigation and discovery unfolds, various students respond differently based on their temperament, heritage and personality.

“The deeper I went, the more passionate I became for knowing more.” one student reflected.

A future improvement of the student guidance might include early identification of various types of learners and addressing them in a more personalized way. One important finding is that the if pedagogy of the process is brought forward to the students continuously, they appear to be more comforted by the unknown. By the Synthesis stage most were in sync with expectations and were fully invested in their progress.

In the proceeding stages they begin to demonstrate various forms of initiative. That is typically

expressed by perpetual visitations of their chosen place even if that is logistically difficult. Also they engage others that might be peripheral to their investigation but would provide valuable nuance, which in turn will inform a more complex and impactful outcome.

Lastly, they demonstrated a sense of rigor, which is self-feeding and dictates the urge of acquiring new skills and methods of production for the successful delivery of their final outcomes. The complexity and sophistication of the projects outputs varies and it is closely dependent on the individual student's aptitude and investment in their studies. However none of them have known what would they have produced as a result of the course experience. In fact many chose a novel destination they needed to discover, investigate and define. Here is how another student summarized her assessment of the process:

"In the end, it wasn't about the literal research but more of being able to convey a feeling and a thought."

Since the creation of a process book was a requirement they had a space to record their progress and verbalize their thoughts and experiences of the place translation process and communicate their final reflections. That proved very valuable for them and their instructors.

5 CONCLUSION

This case study addresses a key moment of transition for a design student. It is situated in a region, which adds some additional peculiarities. This only amplifies the need for a thorough yet accommodating process offering a distinct method for supporting students into growing their self-reliance and sense of ownership. The crafting of a clearly discernible path for incremental and easy to understand tread of progression, assures that teachers and students alike have a common space to engage.

A future iteration of this process might include a more detailed recommendation for the various groups of students tailored to their way of understanding and response to assignment framework. It is highly recommendable to bring elements of this pedagogy on their first and second year studies, so they have a chance to be exposed to these ideas before they have to internalize them in such depth.

While this study has produced proven results, there is still a need for a more quantifiable method of assessing students' outcomes and experiences. While the evidence of successful resolution is well documented, it is nevertheless highly reliant on subjective assessment.

Lastly, while the process needs further refinement, it has proven to be an effective tool for transitioning students from mere consumers of point-by-point instructions to self-driven, self-orienting young designers. In the words of one student:

"In conclusion, this project was very personal to me, and I want the viewer to have the same experience, building their own conclusions using their own imagination and senses."

In the words of another: "this project was not only a good outcome as a project, it was also a great outcome to me, as a designer and as a person, giving me a clear message of what I find important and what I would like to later convey and how I would like to influence people, through my design and my creativity."

While their English proficiency does not raise to the level of their native speaker counterparts they, nevertheless, share an experience of awakening of the potential to be impactful designers.

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