

USING PROCESS BOOKS AS A REFLECTIVE TOOL FOR NON-NATIVE ENGLISH SPEAKERS IN STUDIO BASED EDUCATION

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Abstract

Process books are teaching tools with embedded space for discourse, reflection and record keeping, which help non-native English speakers, internalize pedagogical outcomes. The paper outlines the relationship between design process and self-reflection in media and technology centric education. The analysis of 11 courses with assignment-based process books generated in sophomore, junior and senior core design studios identifies an opportunity for effective self-reflection for non-native English speakers. The format affords a space for structured method of contemplation and assessment of lessons learned. Students demonstrate how they have internalized the making of design outcomes, and discuss the course and their perception of its perceived value. In conclusion, based on the analysis of the course process books, the paper recommends effective format and implementation of process books as an essential pedagogical tool in a studio based education.

Keywords: pedagogy, "process book", "non-native English speaker", self-reflection, studio

1. INTRODUCTION

Teaching design studio in the United Arab Emirates poses some linguistic challenges. For the predominant body of students English is not their native language. While they are able to engage in course project discussions, they have difficulty reflecting on their process when engaged directly. Following distinct design process is a central pedagogical tread of any studio session. Yet many students struggle discussing their process and analyzing the customary path of development as it unfolds. Mastering process and design development procedure is central and inseparable from creating effective design outcomes. In recognition of this, the study sets to investigate the process of documentation and reflection via process book for nonnative English speakers. The need for reinforcement of learned subject mater is ever present in any design studio. Many students believe that design is akin to personal expression; therefore it simply requires inspiration and innate talent. Another challenge teaching students from the region is their relative low exposure to the arts in general prior to entering university. A process book, although required, becomes a space for self-assessment and contemplation and a design process record. As students produce process books for multiple assignments they create documentation for themselves of methods of making and path for procedural progress leading to successful resolution. More importantly they create space for reflection where they could identify thoughts, occurrences and conclusions not apparent in class discussions and final outcomes.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Reflexive practice in a design education has established itself as integral part of effective design pedagogy. While its application varies, it is nevertheless instrumental in furthering the procedural and contemplative aspect of design education. [1] Design pedagogy based on critique, feedback and most importantly reflection is at the core of any well-considered design education program. Making process of making explicit by outlining key elements helps students acculturate to the nuances of perpetual learning and making. [2] The use of reflective journals as an essential element of design education supports the development of sense of depth and complexity of thought. [3] As early as sophomore level studio education reflection has become a vital component of design teaching. [4] The discussion of student-centered learning process helps set students on the path into life-long learning. [5]

3. METHODOLOGY

To investigate the new possibilities for reflexive writing of non-native English speakers in a design studio, the study set to evaluate a number of assignment required process books. As part of the course assignment outcomes students were required to produce a complementary process book. All of them followed the same structure - sequential outline of the process and reflective essay at its conclusion. In the first part they outlined their thinking, research, conceptualizing and making iterations

leading to the final outcome. In the second part they were required to discuss their specific course assignment experiences. All process books were shaped and delivered electronically, which allowed for the inclusion of an eclectic range of supporting media such as video, sounds, photographs and interactive artifacts. Students were instructed to document and include both the successes and shortcomings. While the assignments varied in specificity, theme and scope the requirements for a process book were consistent throughout all courses analyzed for this study. Process books depth and thoroughness varied from course to course but all included the same parts and traced the individual student's efforts. All writing was in English – non-native language to most of the students. However their linguistic deficiencies become evident in most of their writings. The cited extracts are included, as the students, which explain the varied command of spelling, grammar and language structure, have written them. The study also identified that the most insightful writing occurred with junior and senior students.

4. FINDINGS

The study identified a number of themes and areas of discussions students engaged in their process books. Even with some written language deficiencies, all students manage to communicate their contemplations, discoveries and key moments of their development process. The cited extracts are in their original form. This is what one senior design student wrote about his perception and validity of process books:

“I found the idea exciting, because having the concept and idea documented better than having only the final project documented. In this case we will remember every single move and every single detail in each project. Therefore we will have our work reserved from data loss. The idea of process book will be in my mind also with other design courses that are based on process and iterations.”

Students reflected not only on their making but also on the course as a whole and its perceived pedagogy. The findings of the study can be grouped in several categories:

4.1 Facing Shortcomings

As the process of design making unfolds students tackle unknowns and unforeseen challenges. Although they are able to move from task to task and from stage to stage with reasonable reassurance, their efforts do not always materialize the desired results. Shortcomings and even dead ends become inevitable part of their efforts. The process book becomes a space to share frustrations developed during their path of development within the context of the overall making.

“I think my biggest problem was my inability to commit to a single idea. I constantly changed my core idea and that I think resulted in me not having in depth enough process material. This was apparent to me towards the end of the project; I started noticing that I was lacking in process and outcomes.”

Some students grow their ambition as they progress through the process. Paths of development transform from a concept of a project into a vision for a real world development. One senses the frustration of student not having sufficient time and resources to match the grandeur of thinking with the scale of production.

“However i am not convinced that i have reached the end of this project because i think there are much more possibilities on how to commercialise this island.”

They even critique the projects overall direction and timeline. The stages of development could vary not only between assignments but even between students. Prolonging one stage could significantly impact another. This creates the possibility for unevenness in pace and scope within a design process. The net result could be apprehension of not accomplishing the most possible polish of the desired outcome.

“The drawback of this project if any, would be, there was not enough time for design outcome.”

4.2 Recognizing Success

While shortcomings were well recognized, students also celebrated their successes and productive engagements. Some reflections emphasized sentiment rather than detailed occurrences.

“I enjoyed working on this project, it brought the best in me, it made me look deeply in my talents and put them into real life.”

As persistent work of the process accumulates a qualitative shift occurs. Often their reflections culminate in recognition of identified new principle or simply an unexpected accomplishment. More importantly, they recognize that the mastery of principle outweighs a simple desire for quick outcome resolution.

“In terms of the process, I learnt the importance of being committed to the principle/ system behind the outcome than to the outcome itself.”

4.3 Turning points

While their successes and difficulties can be recognized throughout the unfolding of the design process, pivotal moments of conceptual or practical discovery demonstrate a crucial shifts in their design making. Sudden awakening could come at an almost random moment. The requirement for creating a process book helps preserve a moment of resolution leading to an effective final outcome.

“The inspiration a new idea for my project came to me while I was flipping through my Instagram account one night.”

Even the simple act of beginning could be paralyzing and disorienting. A turning point could simply be recognition of the commitment to initiate the process of making.

“So as the weeks went by, I still didn’t formulate a full text for my projection, I simply did not know how to start, so I started with the most mundane exercise a design student would do, key words. Something about getting all these nagging words out of my head made me revisit my strategy”

While their process of design is usually well clarified and demonstrated, that does not automatically guarantee effective application. Student’s personality, beliefs and desires dictate how quickly and thoroughly they internalize and apply design process as required. Some turning points are recognition of a moment at which individual desires gave way to better professional practices.

“The defining point it the project was when I stopped developing the concept to form what I wanted, but instead decided to locate an area, define its needs and characteristics, and develop the concept based on that.”

4.4 Lessons learned

Majority of the reflections centered on specific knowledge which students identified. Learning is personal experience and varies from pupil to pupil. In addition to taking practical steps of acting on procedural instructions, students have to consider the meaning and implication of research and its subsequent findings. In the process, they awaken to unknown strengths and even passions.

“The first thing I have discovered about my self is that I am good at gathering and analysing data.”

In-depth research has significant impact on young designer’s ability to conceive and execute original ideas and approaches. It all begins with observation and contemplation of the their world. No detail is too small to potentially influence a single action or project level thinking.

“One piece of information you come across when you put in that extra hour of observation can change your whole outcome.”

Many awakenings and identified aspects of learning at times feel revelatory to them. They discover that impact of design process is not only influential to a more effective outcome, but also on their way of perceiving the world. A recorded momentary spark of comprehension would allude to a newly awoken state.

“It’s amazing how much you can tell by the traces of people.”

The predominant outcomes of design aim to serve and more importantly impact others. While most students enter university in a relatively early age, they have already accumulated number of attitudes and most importantly experiences. As a result they realize that their life experiences have direct bearing on their individual and more importantly, professional actions. As design is a people-centric discipline a personal experience and understanding of the human condition would play a crucial role of defining audiences and addressing their needs through artifacts and experiences.

“I also learned new ways of relating my own personal experiences to what I am making and to effectively communicate it to my audience.”

Reality is easier to absorb through direct engagement and practice. Most of the students from the study have acquired not only professionally related understandings but also the experience of design process in which there are hardly any guarantees for quick resolution and instant success might be simply an illusion.

“What I’ve learnt from all of this is that sometimes no matter how much effort you put into something, it might not work as smoothly as you had intended.”

Some recognized learning is not just a mechanical accumulation of skills and processes but more importantly an act of complete immersion and alteration of individual perceptions, even personal beliefs.

“As I stated in the introduction, this process book does not do justice to what actually felt like a very overwhelming and messy process.”

4.5 Discussing others

In preparation for professional practice, students are required to practice not only by themselves but also in groups with others. A process book becomes a natural space to reflect on their experiences in engaging their peers. Most of them have never experienced working with others on a single project and/or idea, so a secondary learning outcome is the ability to collaborate with others towards the pursuit of single objective. While they have the opportunity to contribute individual ideas they must master the art of compromise for the benefit of an effective final outcome.

“I’ve learnt how individuals in a team can work individually on separate ideas, and how they can then find similarities in between them and bring them together into one unified product.”

While learning core skills for designing objects, messages and experiences in a group, they also practice the development of critical communication for the benefit of the final resolution. Upon reflection on the process in the process book, they are able to recognize the importance of those ancillary skills, which enable a compelling final project resolution.

“Apart from learning how to work together in a large group, I also learned how to effectively communicate and bring forward my ideas to my fellow group members in a way that they could understand and conveniently provide their own input to the project.”

Some collaborations are not only between students enrolled in specific course but also across disciplines. Their reflections allow them to internalize not just the learning of design and collaborating with their classmates but also engaging colleagues from other disciplines.

“This semester students were able to work collaboratively with students of a different major and work on a wholesome product with their colleagues. Personally speaking, it gave me the opportunity to interact with people of different fields (interior design students) in addressing an issue, which gave me the chance to broaden my knowledge of how to tackle certain issues.”

Not all group work runs smoothly and efficiently. Group dynamic is difficult to predict at the inception and could develop at times in less desirable directions. That poses additional challenges in coordinating attitudes and actions. Following, is an illustration of student who openly discusses his frustrations and most importantly lessons learned while working with others.

“I will definitely learn from this experience how to make sure to work out proper group dynamics before the beginning of the project, and that team members need to be clear from the start on whether they can put in the time and effort required for the project or not.”

4.6 Looking into the future

In addition to reflecting on the process of design and design making with all of its frustrations and moments of awakening, students begin to project their newfound awareness onto their future. The discovery of new experience sets them onto a path of pursuing their future passions and professional endeavors. This is a process book statement documented by a single student who summarizes the possibilities of the future and her personal investment.

"I'm excited to see how far my passion for filmmaking can take me in terms for how much I can help others. This mini-documentary series has been a very emotional experience for both my participants and I."

5. CONCLUSION

Design education is a practice-based discipline. However critical analysis and self-reflection are essential for an effective and profound educational experience. Students are expected to master process of making as well a design forms and tools. Introducing process books as an equally meritorious component of design pedagogy affords an intuitive and easy to understand space for process record keeping and its internalization. More importantly process books become a space for non-native English speakers to express their perceptions and contemplations on successes and perceived shortcomings. In the culture of UAE, open discussions and criticism is genuinely perceived as impolite. Written reflections offer the opportunity for students to consider their personal sentiments relative to process of making and engaging others. Documenting turning points reemphasizes the importance of incremental and persistent effort. As a result students and instructors alike capture a record of making not only on a procedural bases but also as instructive human experiences. Lastly, having been produced in a digital form, the process books are easily accumulated and reviewed by students and instructors and serve as a poignant compendium to final outcome delivery. As a whole, students recognize that the act of documenting their process adds significantly to their learning experience.

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