

transitions

enhancing employability skills in Year 1 architecture curriculum



transitions: Architects-in-Practice working with Architects-in-Education is an academic research project that investigates the relationship between the worlds of architectural practice and architectural education to address the core theme of employability and the underlying educational principle of student engagement.

Contemporary undergraduates present challenges that are not fully addressed by the contemporary university learning environment. Of particular relevance to this project are the 'transition' issues that are common to many first year undergraduates progressing from the 'shallow' learning environment of secondary level education to the 'deeper' learning environment of university education.

'Failure to establish meaningful and effective transition for undergraduates can lead to academic underachievement. The importance of aiding students' transition into higher education is reinforced by appreciating that undergraduates are likely to arrive with learning strategies suitable to school and college life, which are less effective in university environments...'

Vinson, D. et al. (2010) Investigating the relationship between student engagement and transition, *Active Learning in Higher Education*, 11 (13), p.131

This project seeks to foster a considered, active engagement of the student cohort with research that informs their learning environment and enhances their learning experience, allowing the students to become co-creators of their curriculum.

Aims:

- Facilitate student engagement as co-creators in research and learning;
- Actively engage students with learning that addresses the 'transition' issues that are common to first year undergraduates;
- Develop a peer-reviewed curriculum development process that will involve both Architectural education and Architectural practice;
- Enhance (employability skills and prospects) through embedding of considered 'employability skills' in the first year Architectural curriculum.

Context:
The project builds on the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education. (2007). *Enhancement Themes: Employability, Effective Learning and Employability*. This study looked at ways of linking learning effectively to employability skills. The suggestions and advice offered to students by the sample of graduate recruiters, in regards to the areas viewed as essential for development, can be grouped under three broad headings:

- exploration
- analysis, reflection and development
- investigation, preparation and presentation

The project develops this premise to address the subject-specific fundamental architectural employability skills of *communication, representation and professional presentation*. Year 1 architectural students and professional architectural practitioners, contributing as equal participants, actively research the employability related architectural curriculum through a project-based-learning exercise typical to both the worlds of education and practice that addresses these key identified areas:

- exploration is made possible through *direct engagement with recruiters*
- analysis, reflection and development are made possible through the implementation of *collaborative workshops & a reflective blog*
- investigation, preparation and presentation are made possible through a project-based-learning exercise focusing on *communication, representation & professional presentation*



Method - planning:

Groups made up of both students & architects recruited from the world of architectural practice, identify, analyse and develop an architectural proposal for a real client - PLACE, The Architecture and Built Environment Centre for Northern Ireland.

Through considered stages of collaboration, active research and reflection, these groups critique their existing architectural curriculum and in doing so, become co-creators in the process.

Key recommendations for academics and practitioners from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education. (2008). *Quality Enhancement Themes: The First Year Experience. Curriculum design for the first year:* *'commitment to first-year experience being co-designed for their own learning experiences...and recognising the need to provide regular opportunities for first years to make an input into their own learning and first-year curriculum.'*

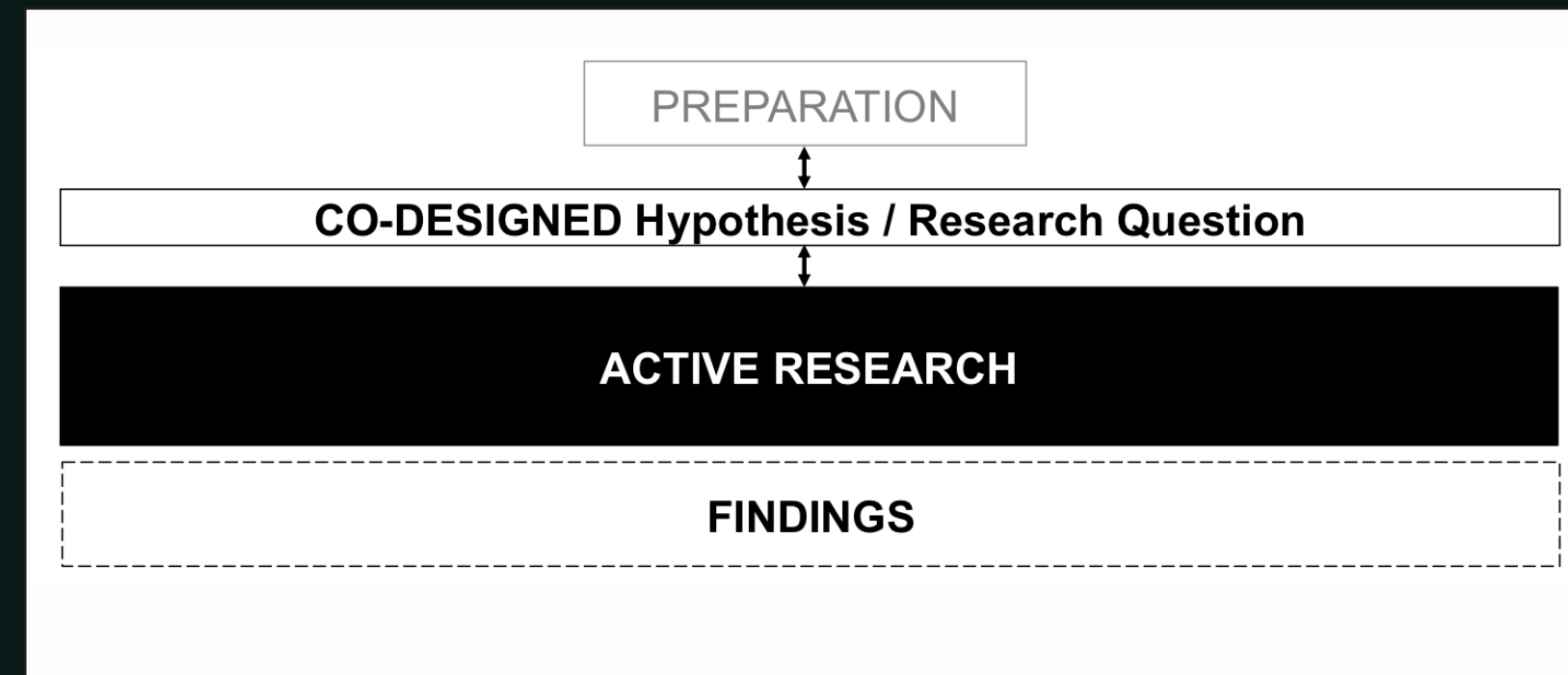
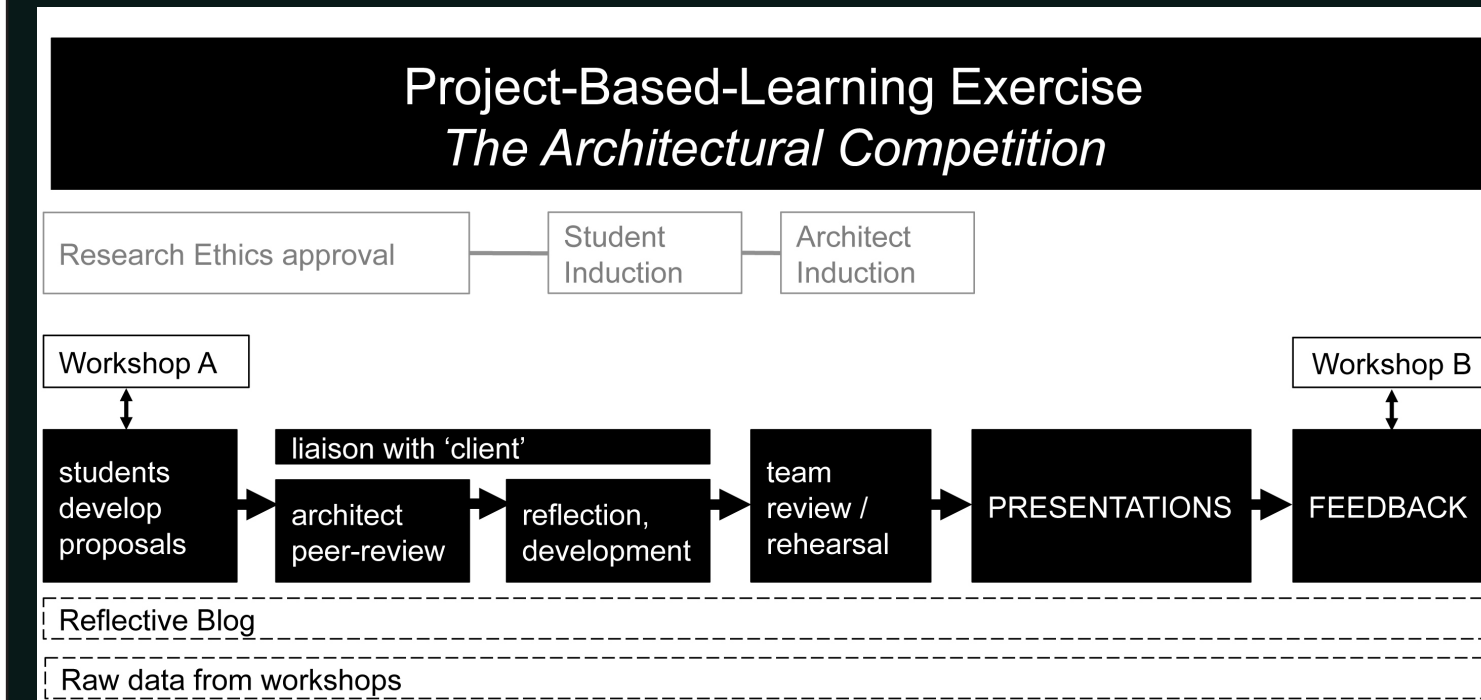
The research methodology recognises the input from both sets of contributors as being equitable: the student providing expertise on how they learn and the architect providing expertise about how they practice.

'I think some teachers... are so focused on getting stuff done that they don't pay attention to their students, who I think are the most valuable resources in a classroom.' (Mihans, Long & Felten, 2008)

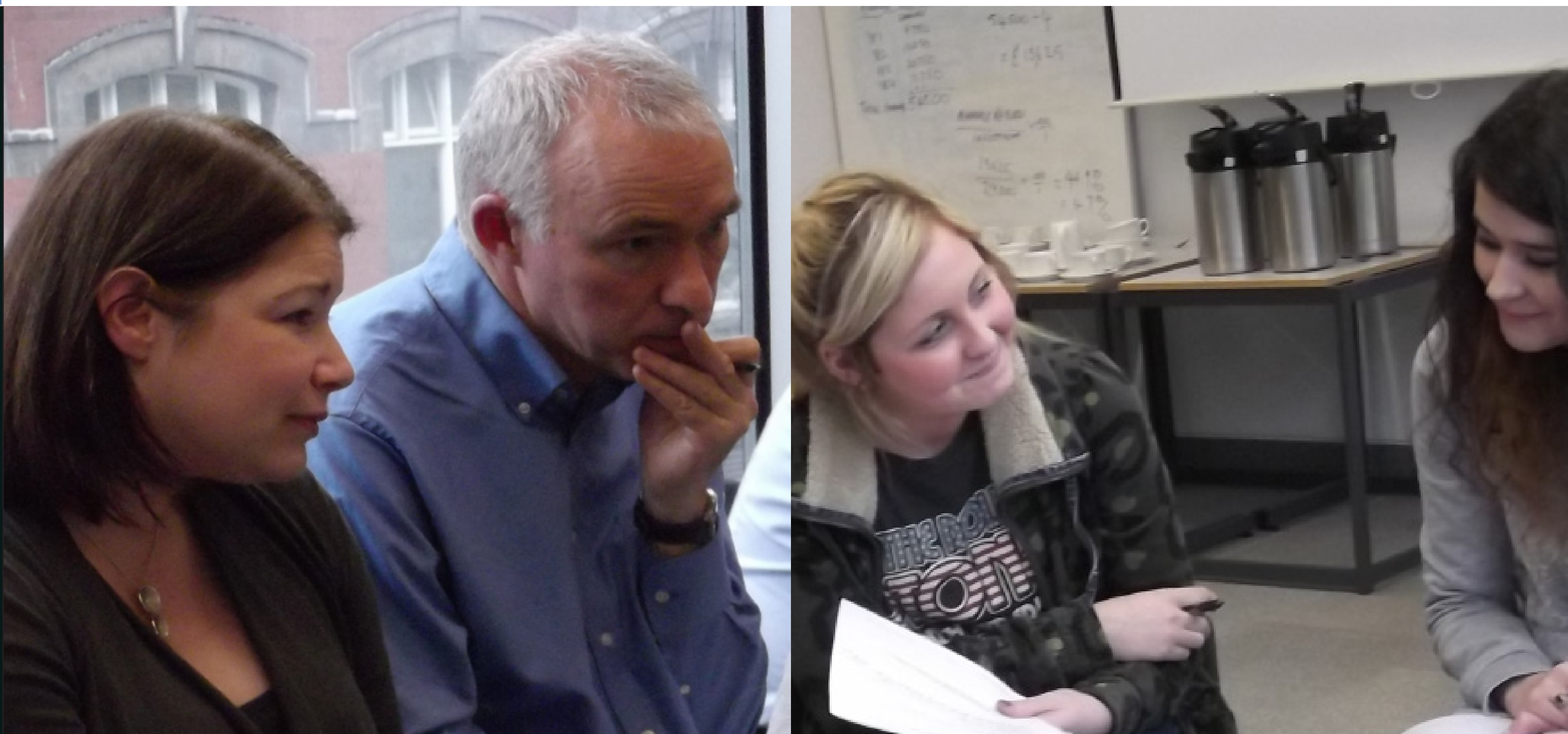
'Asking students to talk about their education is so simple that - whether we are teachers, parents, researchers, or policymakers - we inevitably forget to do it.' (White, 2010)

Method - implementation:

Through active research, the students critique their architectural curriculum and become co-creators of their own research and learning. A number of corresponding collaborative workshops provide the opportunity for reflection on, and evaluation of, the research in progress.



Through structured collaboration with professional architects the project bridges the gap between architectural education and the world of architectural practice.



A selection of quotes from the **Reflective Blog** highlights the student experience and key learning:

'I ...was very hesitant and nervous [meeting] the architects because I didn't think I knew that much about architecture or I didn't have much self confidence... [However, we came to view] our architects like close co-workers...'

'...I have learnt a lot about myself and have challenged myself and pushed [myself] to the limits...I have gained an abundance of valuable experiences...such as questioning how I feel about the course and improving my employability skills to help build my career in architecture...'

'I can't even put down in words how much I have learnt from this opportunity...I have learnt many skills that I will definitely bring to second year...'

'I feel that we need more projects such as this one, where we can take a step away from a 'normal' brief and learn in an alternative way... I look forward to be able to take part in such a project in second year.'

'Presenting to a panel was ...nerve wracking [but] the best experience we could have had in first year. I soon realized ...that confidence, eye contact and being able to engage a client ...is as vital as the scheme itself...to work with architects [was] a total success in learning about clients, presentation, group work and professionalism...we need more projects such as this one.'

'Getting to interact with professionals [and presenting] to a client are experiences that I feel offered the most...in terms of enhancing our employability... because no matter how good at architecture you may be, if you cannot speak confidently and sell yourself ...you will get nowhere...'

'...working with architects in first year was the biggest 'eye-opener' to me in regards to working towards becoming an architect. [Collaborating] with architects [has] helped me better understand what it means to BE an architect rather than just studying architecture.'

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