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STUDIO CULTURE – WHO NEEDS IT?

A Conference for Teachers in Schools of Architecture and Landscape

17-18th December 2003, St Catherine's College, Oxford

TRIGGER PAPER: INTEGRATION

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Introduction

It is my own personal view as Year 1 Convenor that the Year 1 BSc Architectural Studies course should introduce the student to all aspects of Architecture, as a preparation for their training and ultimately for practice. Based initially on a pedagogical intuition, as such the integration of all course matter, both studio and subject classes, is fundamental to the success of this aspiration. How to successfully achieve this integration, and to realise it's educational potential and long term benefit to practice has therefore been a major concern of mine as Year 1 Convenor over the last two academic sessions.

The following paper discusses various steps that have been taken in the BSc Architectural Studies u/g course (Years 1-3), both Department wide and in the Year 1 course specifically, that have advantaged integration between subject classes and the studio environment, and between the subject classes themselves.

Course Structure : The first three years of study are structured autonomously year by year, each year typically split into studio courses running in parallel to subject classes over two semesters in the academic session. In terms of assessment, a credit based system is in operation, nominally 50% to studio, 50% to subject classes. Subject classes (Architectural History and Theory, Media and Communication, Building Technology and Environment, Elements of Architecture) are delivered by Subject Convenors, responsible for the whole three years, whilst a dedicated Year Convenor, who is responsible for the studio course, is responsible for the co-ordination of each individual year. Studio programmes are therefore written by the Year Convenor, and delivered by part time tutorial staff, all from local practice, in a Unit based structure.

Common to such a system is, in the students' eyes, a perceived emphasis on the studio environment and studio classes in preference to the subject classes.

Over the last four academic sessions, developments in the BSc course, its content and structure, have begun to form a possible coherence with regard to both academic content and related integration between all aspects of the course.

Background : In academic session 2000/2001, the subject class course Architectural History and Theory was completely re-written and re-structured. In terms of content, a themed and category based lecture series was introduced in preference to a traditional linear structure. To combat a noticeable lack of engagement by the students with the subject, at the same time each 1hr lecture was followed by a 1hr seminar, initially set up as a small group teaching Q & A session on the preceding lecture. The immediate success of such an arrangement has generated over the following academic sessions an introduction of a lecture/seminar structure into all subject classes. In addition to the pedagogical benefits to the class itself, the culture of rethinking a whole subject class course, as well as its restructuring offered opportunities regarding the integration of the classes to the studio course.

Case Study : Year 1

To establish integration of subject class and studio within the first year, initially the culture of separatism had to be broken. For the subject classes, regular meetings were therefore instigated, now minuted and set to an agenda, to introduce each subject class, the convenor and the content, to each other, and to facilitate an explanation of the content and proposed learning outcomes of the studio course and the aspiration of the year as a whole. Central to these initial discussions was the necessity to bring everyone on board to the idea that all classes could support, be supported by or run in parallel to the studio course.

Regarding academic content of the subject classes, a nominal idea was proposed that Year 1 should address 'principles' of the subject, as is the aspiration of the studio course. This would not negate ARB curriculum requirements, but might relate more directly to the assessment criteria of the subject class.

As it stood, the assessment criteria for each subject class were self-satisfying. There were no examinations per se in any class, all classes adopting a continual assessment system in the form of exercises/assignments.

There seemed to be an opportunity here to correlate this continual assessment scenario with the continual assessment of the studio, and to make a fundamental distinction between an exercise, which might be more class and skill related, and an assignment, which had the possibility to be related to the studio project as a test of knowledge gained. From this thinking, a nominal idea developed, utilising the lecture/seminar structure, to consider the subject class, its content and assessment criteria, as follows ;

Theory (*lecture/lecture room*): **Skill** (*exercise/seminar space*): **Application** (*assignment/studio*).

The idea is intended to be relatively flexible. Each pedagogical requirement, 'theory' 'skill' 'application', does not have to be isolated from the other, nor do they have to remain within the domain of the lecture theatre or seminar space. The structure is simply a framework into which each class and the studio can fit.

Essential however is the character of the assignment. If it is the means by which knowledge gained in the subject class is tested, it seemed opportune to make this test of knowledge fit with the studio course and studio programmes, thereby making the class relevant to the creative design process, and vice versa, whilst at the same time making the task potentially more engaging to the student. Student feedback regarding why attendance and application in subject classes is perceived as less significant than that of studio suggested that visibility was a significant factor, that is that work submitted to subject classes was not submitted to any form of peer review. By applying the class assignment to a studio project, the assignment itself can become associated with the creative process and procedures, able to be pinned up at reviews with the studio project, and therefore no longer effectively 'slipped under the door' of the Subject Convenor. Significantly, the assignment in turn also informs the studio project.

An immediate advantage of associating particularly assignment requirements with studio programme, aside of the general holistic benefits, is that it saves the student time without any loss of learning outcomes. Testing the applicability of knowledge was always inherent in the class curriculum. If the student is testing knowledge against an ongoing design problem, he or she has already covered a lot of the groundwork. Drawings are prepared, research is ongoing, and studio tutors are available to assist in both the class and studio work.

The idea over the last two sessions has begun to take shape, and has generated as a side effect greater discussion between the years themselves. The lecture/seminar releases additional opportunities to expand reflective learning in particular. The knock on effect within studio itself has yet to be fully realised – time tabling of the year has begun to allocate dedicated studio weeks to subject classes, and for this to continue and develop, studio will have to perhaps downsize its own content. The endgame, as has begun to happen in the current session, is that all classes, studio and subject, begin in the studio, with each inextricably linked to the other over the course of a design problem.

Difficulties

. Academic/specialist subject convenors might lack a comprehension of broader architectural issues and familiarity with studio culture and studio teaching methods.

In addition, the culture of separatism might be broken, but an individual mindset might persist. In certain respects, the subject classes have the luxury to deliver their classes without necessarily consideration of the whole. The integrity of subject classes is not however in question. Rather the added value that integration brings needs to be perpetually impressed to become ingrained, to avoid the default to a separatist mentality.

. Part time tutors. Similar to the first point, there can be a mindset on the part of the studio tutors that their task is to deliver the studio programme, and not to either be responsible for or even required to know what the subject classes are doing. The perceived notion that the subject classes are there to support studio programmes needs to be replaced by a more positive view that each can assist the other.

. Time-tabling and resourcing. Inevitably, the time-tabling of so many lectures, seminars, and associated reviews, pin ups etc can become difficult, as is the pressure particularly on subject classes to resource the additional teaching load the structure requires.

. Co-ordination. In similar vein, the co-ordination of the whole falls to the Year Convenor, and therefore depends very much on the Year Convenors dedication to the principle, the Year Convenor having a comprehensive understanding of the whole subject class programme, and additional pressure on the Year Convenor to arrange the whole thing without it going into gridlock and/or chaos. The content of the whole course needs to be known at the outset, to be suitably co-ordinated, yet for it to remain flexible enough to accommodate curriculum changes, and the inevitable unknowns thrown up in a typical academic session. Confirming this content generally and more specifically the delivery of subject class assignments can also become a bit of a grey area, depending on individuals concerned, the mutual agreement and comprehension of course content, and the maintenance of the lines of communication throughout the session.

Conclusion

The process of architecture will always be holistic. As long as it is taught in segments, its educational structure will always run the risk of failing to meet this primary educational aim, and be continually shooting itself in the foot. The pedagogical and professional advantage to breaking the perceived lack of integration between studio and subject classes is I believe a fundamental imperative, to recognise that every part of the architectural process is not in contradiction but has equal value, and to realise the added value that integration would bring to all parts of the educational process, to staff and student alike.

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