

Activate: Social Action in Landscape Architecture Design Education

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KEY WORDS

Campaign
Advocacy
Design
Landscape

This paper is a reflection on the teaching approach adopted in two landscape architecture design studios where students were engaged in developing design projects and campaign strategies informed by personal understandings of action and advocacy for and with communities. The approach was a deliberate application of principles from advocacy theory enmeshed in an educational philosophy of learner-centredness and the intent was for students to develop strong individual senses of awareness and empowerment in an environment that value personal interests and learning. An evaluation of the approach as an attempt to position landscape architecture as social practice is provided.

INTRODUCTION

THIS PAPER IS A reflection on the teaching approach adopted in two undergraduate design studios taught in 2003 to second, third and fourth year landscape architecture students. The educational intent of *Astudio* in semester 1 and *STUDIO B: campaign* in semester 2 was to enable students to develop design projects and campaign strategies informed by personal understandings of action and advocacy for and with communities. This approach was a deliberate application of principles from social science to the educational structure of a design studio to encourage students to create design projects that act on contemporary social issues and, therefore, embed landscape architecture as a social practice (Swaffield, 2002).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework grounding the studio strategies was derived from the education and social science disciplines. In summary, these include learner-centred educational theory (Biggs, 1999), the educational philosophy of conscientisation (Freire, 1972), post-modern concepts of narration, voice and location (Kwon, 2002; O'Brien and Penna, 1998; Swaffield, 2002) and principles of empowerment drawn from social action and advocacy (Barr, 1995; Brown, 1988; Hogan, 1996; Saul, 1995; O'Connor, 1995).

The concept of empowerment, learner-centredness and Freire's philosophy of conscientisation were central to the development of the studios. The learning activities were designed for students to engage with issues of personal interest (Biggs, 1999) as a vehicle to value self-awareness, trust their perceptions of their local landscapes and analyse influencing forces present. It was intended that these

investigations would give students the confidence to propose action and change in the context of their projects (Barr, 1995; Brown, 1988; Freire, 1972; Rees, 1991; Saul, 1995).

PROJECT STRUCTURE

Students' involvement in the studios was structured around three phases: orientation to the core ideas of the studio, writing of independent briefs and developing projects to the briefs. At the close of each studio, students also completed surveys evaluating their overall experience and involvement in the studio. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a small number of students at the conclusion of the final studio. Through the duration of the studios, teaching staff adopted a reflective practice approach to monitor the success of the educational strategy (Light and Cox, 2001).

In the orientation phase of each studio, weekly exercises were based around explorations of each student's own neighbourhood, and understanding of local places and issues relating to that landscape (Kwon, 2002). Biggs (1999) and Prosser and Trigwell (1999) state that students approach learning according to their perceptions of the learning environment, so it was important that studio work in the first phase validated each student's sense of self and increased their confidence to read social codes and values in the surrounding world. Attention was given to students' individual needs to encourage their sense of empowerment and reduce the impact of implicit power relationships in design studio learning environments that often discourage students from revealing their personal histories and interests (Yanar, 2001).

In the orientation phase, students were also asked to structure their engagement with the exercises by applying Peavey's (with Hutchinson, 1993) method of strategic questioning that attempts to orient an individual towards a framework of social change. The new knowledges gained through strategic questioning empower the individual and "release blocks to change and new ideas" (Peavey with Hutchinson, 1993, p 2).

To mitigate against the effects of the normative studio culture, where the studio can be a stressful and intimidating learning situation (Davies, 1997; Davies and Reid, 2001; Jackson, 1995 and 1997; Yanar, 2001), students were encouraged to develop projects in the brief writing and project development phases based on personal interests and values. Project scopes were deliberately wide with the only parameter being that the issue or site was to be substantially relevant to 'landscape' to ensure students were encouraged to learn beyond prevalent social norms of the studio environment (Oxman, 2001) or "prevailing modes of thinking" (Yanar, 2001, p 243).

In *Astudio*, each student's project was guided by the research question: 'how can changes to the landscape be generated through radical action?'. The intention was for this question to enable students who are normally more conformist than critical (Yanar, 2001) to circumvent the implicit power relationship in the studio

environment and undertake provocative actions. In *STUDIO B: campaign*, the research question emphasis shifted from the concept of radical to that of campaign. Student projects were to be framed as a campaign (Atkin and Freimuth, 2001; Salmon, 1989) and could take a number of forms that included: direct action projects in a landscape; developing a concept and campaign design strategy as a theoretical piece; or working with people in communities to develop material to assist these communities towards their own empowerment (Nash, 2001; Public Interest Advocacy Centre, 1996).

EVALUATION AND IMPLICATIONS

As the first studio evolved, it became apparent that the (well intended) research question was creating a contradiction with the teaching method and studio aims. The inherent demand to be radical was perceived by many students to be prescriptive and intimidating. The research question prescribing radical action, in effect to take an 'avante garde' approach, in many instances inhibited student freedom of choice for self-expression through their personal project development. It did not provide an appropriate and enabling boundary for many students and, particularly for many second year students, it was like being in a 'black hole' (Baird, 1995). As a consequence, the initial studio weekly exercises often led to potential projects that were not radical as perceived by students and staff. A key difference between the two studios was that *STUDIO B: campaign* students were not required to take radical action. Students were free to make choices based on their own briefs about how they personally engaged with the world through their projects.

In hindsight, it is recognised that a moral undertone remarkably similar to social cause reform agendas driving nineteenth-century landscape architectural public practice also implicitly informed the attitude of teaching staff who, perhaps, were waiting for the arrival of "transcendental revolutionary schema" (O'Brien and Penna, 1998, p 57) in line with the teachers' personal philosophies of social action. Both studios were also influenced by implicit presumptions that included: students would care about social causes; students could easily assimilate sophisticated critical understandings of the world around them and would be able to identify issues; and, students would be motivated by personal passion into unique innovative propositions and actions and thereby engage in deeper learning (Biggs, 1999).

Despite the structural and attitudinal limitations discussed previously, students from both studios produced projects that were extremely varied, ranging from: a concept design and campaign strategy for integrated public transport on a freeway; designs for mobile kits for the urban homeless intended simultaneously to provoke debate about homelessness in an affluent society; and activating a community to participate in the building of a neighbourhood pocket park. Overall, it was discernible to teachers and guest critics (same key critics for both studios) that there was a higher quality and depth of student projects in *STUDIO B: campaign*. This was evidenced also in the student evaluations and interviews where students were very positive about opportunities to explore cross-disciplinary issues in an environment

that encouraged them to express their learning freely. Interestingly, *Astudio* was comprised of a cohort of students with considerably stronger academic records than *STUDIO B: campaign* where the majority of students had been unsuccessful in at least one (and up to three) previous studios. Also, student evaluations were correspondingly stronger for *STUDIO B: campaign*. The discernible overall improvements of student satisfaction with their experience and the quality of their projects in the second studio suggests that the adjustments made to the structure by removing the *Astudio* demand of radical action and having a clearer and more achievable set of expectations enabled students to link more successfully self-awareness and self-empowerment to project development and completion in *STUDIO B: campaign*.

CONCLUSION

Although some of the presumptions that informed the studios discussed, particularly in the first semester in *Astudio*, inadvertently undermined the intentions of developing students' self-awareness and self-empowerment, the findings of this paper may be of interest to those teachers exploring with their students the possibilities for contemporary landscape architecture as an inherently social practice rooted in the particularities of place and time (Swaffield, 2002, p 1).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Tony Aravidis, Landscape Architect and Landscape Activist who collaborated in the studios as the technical teacher; Gillian Davy, Community Advocacy Unit, RMIT University for her advice on studio development and her work with students through teaching and critique.

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