

Attending to liminality: Constructing an identity as a student of Architecture through experiential learning

Ann Quinlan, Architecture Program, Faculty of Built Environment, University of New South Wales, Australia
Helen Farrell, Learning Centre, University of New South Wales, Australia
Paul Hogben, Architecture Program, Faculty of Built Environment, University of New South Wales, Australia

Architecture as a discipline and practice engages simultaneously and relationally with the material and immaterial world of the Arts, Humanities and Science. Architects engage with the paradox of designing for contexts and experiences that do not already exist, that are beyond the norm. In this way, Architects engage with liminality, the threshold between "old" paradigms and values and the "new" which are not yet clear (Mayer & Land, 2005). It is the period of indeterminacy prior to the crossing of the threshold (Cousins, 2006; Kiley & Wisker, 2009).

Enabling Skills and Research Practice is designed strategically as a first step to prepare first year students of Architecture to be not only competent, but also professionals of courageous creativity and empathy in realising ideas of insight and projection. Over two hundred students across three differing architecture degree programs undertake the course. The course community includes local and international students, recent school leavers and mature age students, supported by lecturing staff, industry guests and 15 senior student tutors. Student engagement with this range of professionals maximizes students' success in their progressive work in developing academic, visual and computer literacies, as well as their performative work that demonstrates their interaction with these literacies.

Enabling Skills and Research Practice also takes an integrative approach within lecture, studio and computing lab settings to both support and test students' construction of creative synthesis in their project work which, in turn begins their transformation into their new identities as students of Architecture. By introducing students to academic inquiry through investigating a building in context, students are assisted to acculturate into the field of architecture and to identify weaknesses and strengths in their understanding and practices so that they may improve their learning.

This multilayered course goes beyond the practicalities of functional processes to abstraction and an interpretive stance by engaging creatively with ideas. Moving beyond functionality to abstraction is a threshold many students find challenging especially in relation to the required research approach and in their development of critical practice particularly interpretation, reflection and evaluation.

The challenge is addressed by the assigned formative and summative tasks which encourage students to make connections across academic, social, ethical and cultural contexts and to augment their formation and articulation of creative ideas. This learning approach includes multiple opportunities for consolidation of ideas and skills and personalised learning through group and individual feedback, self-reflection, peer review as well as the staged application of ideas and representation skills in linked scaffolded projects. Conceptual development and engagement with critical practices is substantiated in students' final submissions of a folio of work representative of their engagement with Enabling Skills and Research Practice. This recursive and excursive approach optimises students' opportunities to embrace cognitive growth and engage with critical practices to generate a transformative learning experience (Cousins, 2006).

While the visualisation of threshold is very familiar to Built Environment professionals, as a metaphorical concept (Mayer and Land 2005), the concept of liminality, offers commencing students the opportunity of conceptual transformation as they adopt their new identities as Architects.

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