

A Gust of Myrtle Trees and Other Curious Proposals: Engaging Studio-Focussed Students with History and Theory

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Students who enrol in architecture, design or visual art studio programs usually expect to become creative practitioners in their chosen field. The focus of their interests is usually the studio component, frequently followed by an interest in technological and digital aspects of their studio practice. Rarely do they intend to become historians, theorists or scholars. For this reason, it can be challenging to engage student interest and excitement in history and theory, especially at the early stages of their studies. Incoming student knowledge ranges from a relatively sophisticated understanding of social, political, geographic, architecture art and/or design history, to those who are confident that Paris is the capital of Rome, that the Sydney Opera House was designed in 1850, or that forms may be described as 'Plutonic solids' (all seen, more than once, as answers to exam questions).

Locating an interdisciplinary design history unit in first year of studies and the two semester history of architecture survey across second year, introduces students in the earliest days of their studies to the history languages of the disciplines, and to conventions of academic research, writing and referencing. Both the design history and architectural survey 'road trips' set selected key examples of international design and architecture in a broader social and cultural context.

Developing and delivering history and theory units requires strategies to engage student interest in what may from the outside appear rather dreary, especially for those claiming they disliked history at school, or are 'not good at writing.' Broader, ongoing questions ask educators to consider how students can develop a broader cultural and historical understanding of precedent in their discipline in a broader social context? How can they learn to discriminate between scholarly voices and unsupported opinion as sources of information, and how can they be encouraged to develop their own informed 'voice' to support, complement and promote their creative studio work?

This paper examines strategies and programs designed to address undergraduate students' initial perceptions and scepticism regarding the difficulty, relevance or purpose of studies of the history and theory of their selected and related fields of practice. It considers approaches

to engaging student responsibility for their learning, and reflections on achieving deeper learning. The paper will focus primarily on undergraduate architecture students' engagement with architecture history. It is based on the author's experiences developing architecture, design and visual art history / theory studies for studio-based programs in several Australian universities. The paper also draws on the work of Biggs and Tang, Toohey, Ramsden, Pallasmaa and other writers.

History and Theory in Architecture Program Accreditation

The role of history and theory studies varies widely among institutions offering studies in architecture, landscape, interior architecture, industrial design, or visual arts, depending on both the nature of the course, and any requirements to attain accreditation. *The Australian Institute of Architects Policy on Tertiary Education of Architects – Standards for Programs in Architecture* (RAIA 2009) details expectations of graduates from the professional degree leading to registration as an architect in Australia:

History and Theory Studies

Knowledge criteria:

- i) An awareness of philosophical, cultural and political movements
- ii) An understanding of the history and theory of Western, non-western, regional and indigenous architecture
- iii) An understanding of the sources of specialist information and expertise, including an understand of issues of heritage and conservation in the built environment

Application and Synthesis

- i) An ability to utilise speculation, iteration and reflection in critical discourse
- ii) An ability to inform action through knowledge of historical and cultural precedents in architecture
- iii) An ability to define personal values systems and ethical positions

Why Study History?

There is a philosophic and pedagogic commitment to the importance of history as an essential component of the Architecture program. However, my experience indicates that it's not necessarily so evident to first or second year architecture students *why* they should study history, when what they *really* want to do is design buildings. Students undertaking a mandatory unit may not initially understand why it's required, and may be indifferent, or even hostile, to the subject. Some reticence to the required interdisciplinary Design History and specific Architecture History units is regularly signalled by a show of hands in the first class. Broadly, years of observation indicate that in a large group of students in a mandatory unit, about 25% will commence and remain highly engaged, about 50% will be comparatively

neutral and about 25% disinterested (though a proportion of each of the second two groups will move into a more engaged group). The arrangement of lectures, tutorials and assignments deliberately grants students agency in how deeply they engage with the subject. There is considerable choice in the assignments and options to attend or participate in a limited number of classes and still complete the minimum requirements without actively cheating. In contrast, there is a consistent level of engagement and achievement of students from other disciplines, such as Cultural Heritage, who have enrolled in architecture or design history. This seems to support Toohey's observation that students 'who make their own choice of units are more likely to take a deep approach to learning [...in] an area in which they already have some interest.' (Toohey 1999, 15)

To initiate student consideration of *why* architecture history is important, the first lecture powerpoint includes as a conversation starter:

- **Why should architecture and design students study history?**
- Architects and designers have specific needs to understand the histories of their discipline to become effective designers.
- Successful architects and designers almost always have a broad knowledge of their both own field and other disciplines.
- They know about the social, cultural, geographic, economic, technical and philosophical contexts of the designed and built environment.
- Architects, need a working knowledge of *precedent* (what's gone before) and *type* (houses, churches, theatres, libraries, etc.), as well an understanding contexts in which buildings, towns and cities develop and change over time.
- The study of architecture and design history offers opportunities to engage with the rich heritage of the designed and built environment – knowledge of the past helps us to decide the ways forward in the future.

Throughout the semester, these points are revisited to encourage students to reflect on how the study of history might inform and contribute to their practice. It is made explicit and is particularly effective when the study of history intersects with ideas investigated in concurrent studio projects, as discussed by Stephen Frith and Eugenie Keefer Bell in *Re-drawing the House of Pliny the Younger*. Here a series of lectures and readings on the history of houses and dwelling accompanied the student's project to design their first house. (Frith & Bell, 2005)

Performance Anxieties : To Lecture Or Not?

Theoretical work on active learning and problem based learning of Biggs and Tang (2007), Laurillard (2002) and others may be productively integrated with the didactic lecture form to achieve desired learning outcomes. Interestingly, student feedback overwhelmingly supports continuation of face to face lectures. In this regard, lectures, especially where delivered in a

manner sensitive to scholarship on how learning occurs, need not be precluded from the larger repertoire of go-between stratagems of effective academics.

More Choice, Deeper Learning

This approach to architecture history assignments and assessment is informed by common principles, including Paul Ramsden's thinking about assessment as a means of 'providing opportunities for students to demonstrate how much they understand.' (Ramsden 2003, 185) Students have considerable choice in selecting topics for essay and tutorial assignments comprising 75% of the assessment. Students can select from a list of research questions, or can develop their own in consultation with the tutor. The essay and tutorials provide opportunities for students to have deeper learning in an area of personal interest. The research projects are framed as a dialogue with the text book and lectures which provide a 'roadmap' overview, while the essays and tutorials are designed to 'drill down' into specific topics, and tutorial presentations contribute to the learning of the group. There are significant elements of student choice in each of the assessment tasks. As Toohey notes,

Within prescribed units a similar level of motivation [for deep learning] can often be achieved by allowing students the choice of topic for a major assignment. Choice helps to promote ownership and responsibility. (Toohey 1999, 15)

The positive learning outcomes associated with choice which have been examined by numerous academic scholars, including Ramsden. His discussion on '[a]ssessing the content of a humanities course,' notes the positive outcomes where 'students are treated as responsible participants in a search for understanding, answerable to each other and to their teachers for the quality of their learning.'(Ramsden 2003, 194–195)

More Learning, Less Marking: The Study Guide / Workbook / Journal

Over several years, I've developed weekly worksheets aligned with the lectures and text readings, intended to facilitate self-directed study in Architecture History. Students were encouraged to join together as what Biggs calls 'learning partners' (Biggs and Tang 2007, 126) to undertake the worksheets in whatever manner they found useful, as the worksheets did not form part of the subject assessment. International students reported finding both the 'partnership' approach and the worksheets particularly helpful. The results were evident in both the history and studio subjects, as the students developed abilities to use the verbal, symbolic (eg., graphic and representational languages), and material languages of architecture at a particularly rapid rate.

Over subsequent semesters, in response to student requests, the originally separate weekly sheets were bound together in a study guide and distributed at the beginning of semester. Students initially indicated a preference for the paper version, bringing the workbooks to class for lectures, sketches of buildings and construction details, or carried for spontaneous group or individual work. With recent moves to greater on-line delivery and class use of laptops and iPads in class, the semester workbooks are available online at the start of semester, uploaded in Word for ease of student manipulation. Students usually take a 'scrapbook' approach, adding in sketches and images. When the exams were based on recall, students would also make 'flash cards' for group practice in building identification.

The study guide has subsequently been revised in a number of ways in recognition of the changing cohort of students. For many students, the history assignments are only the first or second time they've been required to write an essay or give a tutorial presentation. Mature age students sometimes find this daunting at the outset, but usually find their efforts worthwhile and empowering. The study guide now includes essay and tutorial question options, a detailed guide to referencing, and paper formatting information. The number of questions, terms and buildings were reduced to the (arguably) most significant, and in numbers appropriate for undergraduate survey units. In recognition of the increasing number of students for whom English is a second, third or fourth language, the material was revised for clarity in language (endeavouring to eschew the author's proclivity to elaborated phraseology).

Testing Times: A Gust of Myrtle Trees

Several years ago while sitting an architecture history exam, a student searching their memory for the ancient writer of *The Ten Books of Architecture*, Vitruvius, apparently faintly recalled another ancient, Augustine. The test question was confidently answered, 'A gust of myrtle trees.' The inadvertent poetry of that response made awarding points a tempting option. But this, and other misnomers, 'Plutonic solids,' 'the profit of Mohammed,' and endless curious juxtapositions and errors of name, place and time – Paris, the capital of Rome – suggested a need to reflect on the level of learning achieved by students preparing for a written exam.

I've had many discussions with colleagues about the usefulness of exams to encourage learning, whether that learning is surface or deep, and what students retain from the experience. The consensus among the architecture history lecturers consulted is that tests are useful in the survey subjects, especially at first and second year of the program. Later year students consistently support retaining the tests as a useful stimulus to learning. In the context of a larger pedagogical strategy in the architecture course, experience tends to

indicate the efficacy of tests in building a basic verbal and visual language, and in students developing a sense of historical chronology and geography.

There is, admittedly, a degree of 'bulimic' learning in closed book exams – ingesting large quantities of material (tasty or not), regurgitating it on demand. Despite exhorting students to complete the study guide as an aid to learning, it was evident that students with better test results and higher levels of retention of the material did engage with the study guide/work book, the less successful ones tended to complete it only partially, if at all. The exam itself was a source of considerable distress to some students, and the pedagogical outcomes open to question. Facilitating students' development of a sense of temporal progression and broad knowledge of architecture and related disciplines is an intended outcome of study (eg., Notre Dame de Paris was built long after the Great Pyramid of Giza, Michelangelo painted the Sistine, not sixteenth, Chapel and the *Haj* is a pilgrimage to Mecca, rather than to the Taj Mahal), general and specific details can be readily accessed by digital means where a student has a workable knowledge of the field. In their future professional lives, graduates are likely to constantly use laptops, iPads or smart phones, such that electronic access to information, facts and details is readily at hand. All these factors suggested revisiting the manner in which the units' intended learning outcomes were achieved.

Clearly the study guide was an effective learning tool, but to make it mandatory, eg., graded, would both undermine the goal of independent / group learning, and would massively increase the marking load. After trialling with a smaller class of some 40 students, the study guide and exam were more explicitly integrated. Completing the study guide/work book remains entirely optional, but it becomes more of a journal. Each student can bring their workbook/journal to use in the exam. Students can work individually or collaboratively when studying, but each workbook brought to the exam must be the individual student's, not just a photocopy of all or part of another student's work. The workbook/journals are collected along with the exam to ensure compliance with the 'individual' requirement, and later returned to students. Informal observation and conversation with students had previously indicated the workbook's efficacy, but a 20% exam failure rate in *Introduction to Architecture History*, as in first semester 2009, was common but not formally attributable to workbook engagement. In 2010, results were clear—every student who more or less completed the workbook passed the exam, while each of the few students who chose not to do the workbook failed the exam.

In *Teaching for Quality Learning at University*, Biggs (2007) identified two essential factors to motivating student learning. It has to be important; it must have some *value* to the learner, and the learner needs to *expect success* when engaging in the learning task. (Biggs and Tang 2007, 32). This new approach met both Biggs' requirements. Students were overwhelmingly positive about the option, and understood that they could choose their level of engagement and achievement in the unit. The level of student engagement with the material

markedly increased, as evidenced in the workbook/journals, the essays and tutorial presentations, and in the exam results. Feedback from students in the contemporaneous anonymous online unit satisfaction scores, and from informal comments in later semesters confirmed the strategy's success.

The workbook/journal option allows students to learn in a manner that individually suits them, approaching the material through reading, writing and/or drawing in a time and place they find convenient. The approach also aligns with Bloom's 1956 *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives*, which makes evident the diverse ways in which students learn, as more recently noted by Gardner (2000) in *Intelligence Reframed: Multiple Intelligences for the Twenty-first Century*.

Thinking Hands

To further linkages with design studio skills, students are now requested to include only hand-drawn images in the workbook / journal. Students usually agree that writing or drawing helps them to 'embody' the architectural material more fully than just hearing or seeing it. The requirement to hand draw is intended to cultivate haptic connections between reading, observing, recording and interpreting – with drawing in itself a sensuous aspect of developing a more nuanced, agile understanding of the subject. This has resonance with Finnish architect and theorist Pallasmaa's (2009) writing in his book, *The Thinking Hand: Existential and Embodied Wisdom in Architecture*, in which he discusses the role of the computer, the hand, models and drawings in the development of architecture. Pallasmaa observed that

[w]hile drawing, a mature designer and architect is not focused on the lines of the drawing, as he is envisioning the object itself, and in his mind holding the object in his hand or occupying the space being designed [...] This is an intimacy that is surely difficult, if not impossible, to simulate through computer-aided means of modelling and simulation. (Pallasmaa 2009, 59)

Laurillard (2002) observed that 'teaching is essentially a rhetorical activity, seeking to persuade students to change the way they experience the world through an understanding of the insights of others.' (Laurillard 2002, 29) In his major work, *Truth and Method*, Gadamer (1960/1996), draws attention to the importance of the 'rightness' of the question in his discussion of 'the hermeneutic priority of the question.' He directs our focus to Socratic dialectics, in which 'the essence of the question is to have sense,' to 'bring into the open.' Engaging students' interest with the many 'questions' of history and theory is a continuing and rewarding challenge.

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