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3-2002

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Recommended Citation

Eaton, Marcella and Wilson Baptist, Karen, "Educating Emerging Vision" (2002). *Proceedings of the 18th National Conference on the Beginning Design Student*. 29.

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Educating Emerging Vision

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Learning to see requires practice, risk-taking, and a deliberate awakening of conscious perception. Vision which can be interpreted as an integrated human capacity that emerges from the world of lived experience, is participatory and engaged rather than detached and observatory. Learning to look - vision - is deeply subjective, emerging from experience and critical consciousness. When vision becomes clear, students become aware of what was once hidden, lost, or invisible to them. Awakened vision requires a response. Educators must teach learners to balance their vision with action, channeling 'seeing' as a force against fear, and isolation, (that so often occurs in the beginning design studio) and non-sustainable practices (that so often occurs in the pedagogy of beginning design education). Learning to look in a conscious, participatory and critical manner educates individuals to be empowered and activated by emerging visions of what the world could be.

EDUCATING EMERGING VISION

Teaching in a large 'beginning design' studio involves an awakening for both the educator and the student. An awakening suggests a movement from night to day - from darkness to light. This metaphor presents an opportunity to frame the notion of educating emerging vision in terms of light - what is known, and of darkness - what is unknown. To further emphasize these ideas, it is instructive to add that beginning design texts often treat the complexity of light in the simplest of terms. The divergent effects of natural and artificial illumination are reduced to light, shade, and shadow, allowing students to portray objects and spaces as simplistic collections of form. This reductive technique can be seen as echoing some precarious assumptions within the pedagogy of the first year design studio. If shadow is light's counterpart (von Meiss, 1986, 1991) then the hidden curriculum could be seen as the obstructive counterpart to emerging vision. Hidden curriculum refers to the "unstated values, attitudes, and norms which stem tacitly from the social relations of the school and classroom as well as the content of the course."¹ Design educators often teach in the shadow of hidden curriculum. This comparative darkness is caused by the sheltering effect of a predominantly unreflective practice-based pedagogy that influences much beginning design studio education. These practices perpetuate both how and what the educators' themselves were taught. An awakening of vision requires a movement away from the desire to simplify or to be unnecessarily complex. It requires clarity about uncertainty; there are no or perhaps few right answers. There are only 'tested ways' of doing things. The

paradox of emerging vision is the idea that uncertainty becomes associated with light, what is known or perhaps what can become. This concept is at odds with many and is perhaps one of the biggest challenges in the education of beginning design students.

A further consideration of the discussion of light reinforces this view. "When the contrast is strong, due to light coming from only one direction, information about the object is reduced . . . If the contrast is reduced, or even balanced by lighting from several sources, the three-dimensionality is increased. If the lighting is uniform, coming from all sides, the object becomes flatter. Each context and object can be lit in such a way as to enhance its three-dimensionality and establish a balance between contrast and homogeneity."² The suggestion is that the hidden curriculum often acts as a single light source that illuminates the practice of instructing rather than educating individuals in design education. This hidden curriculum acts as a negative force, ambushing student experience and eclipsing emerging vision. Dutton has observed that it is essential for design educators to "investigate deeply not only the many issues of design, but the nature of design education itself, especially how knowledge and meaning are produced and disseminated, how social relations are produced and disseminated, and how students and teacher come to see themselves in these activities."³ This paper will highlight practices that could combat this often deeply entrenched studio pedagogy, in an attempt to optimize the development of emerging vision in first year design students. A multi-disciplinary design team can provide ways of seeing from several sources, thereby increasing the diversity of the studio. If thinking and vision are uniform, or monoscopic the emerging vision can be controlled and subsequently limited. "Education can counter the inertial tendencies that obscure the multiplicity of possibilities in human existence."⁴ An opportunity exists in the environmental design studio for each student and educator, and educator and educator to expand or enhance their vision while embracing the uncertainty between lightness and darkness, between contrast and homogeneity, and between what is known and what might be.

Teaching in a large 'beginning design' studio involves an awakening of both the educator and the student. The University of Manitoba offers a Bachelor of Environmental Design degree that acts as a feeder program for their graduate departments of Architecture, City Planning, Interior Design and Landscape Architecture. It is unique in that Environmental Design is not

a department but a program. There are no dedicated Faculty members; instead they are drawn from the graduate departments on a two to four year rotation. The 'beginning design' studio has a team of two architects, two interior designers, one landscape architect and one sessional instructor.

'Learning to look' takes on multiple meanings in this environment. Inevitably the different disciplines share a core of similar knowledge and values. What is seen, however, and what is valued in the observation is often contrary. Initially the gaze is often discipline-bound. Through the experience of the multidisciplinary studio approach, an expanded vision can emerge. As the lines distinguishing disciplines become increasingly blurred in practice, both educators and students have much to gain from the experience of sharing views and approaches from the beginning of studio education.

In this environment instructors deeply question the forms of knowledge and beliefs through which they construct and impart design curriculum. Curricular constructions and social and teaching behaviors as manifested in design studio can channel students in both positive and negative ways. We see students respond to the indoctrination of the hidden curriculum in different manners as they form both allegiances and friendships based on similar interests, respond to educator/critics of certain persuasions, and begin to change their appearances so that they look more like design students. However in an integrated studio program, whose stated purposes are to provide a "solid grounding in the basic knowledge and vocabulary shared by all environmental design disciplines,"⁵ disciplinary boundaries can set up an atmosphere of barely concealed intransigence. The hegemonic allegiances that bind each instructor are often so obvious as to mock the term hidden curriculum. This phenomena has been named "hiding in plain sight" (Margolis, Soldatenko, Acker, Gair, 2001). It is enacted on many levels, such as during studio meetings when the development of project briefs becomes derailed by language games – either disciplinary or institutionally, to within the design studio itself, where students are seen to be operating within the confines of one discipline or another. Thus the first year studio not only continues to reproduce the cultural stereotypes of gender, race, and class which persistently haunt all design disciplines,⁶ but it also perpetuates a socially-constructed stratification which artificially separates the environmental design disciplines. Learning to look suggests we must constantly be watchful for these submerged visions within the curriculum while creating the opportunities for the benefits of academic freedom within the studio. However, as Dutton illustrates, many studio educators see themselves as conducting a design practice or atelier within the studio rather than teaching, stating that "...architectural programs are staffed by people (mostly architects) who see the practice and theoretical development of architecture as more important than the practice and theoretical development of education."⁷ These solely practice-based approaches to education have no basis in the 'beginning design' studio. Critical reflection upon the practice of both teaching and education is an integral element of emerging vision. Not only do design educators often fail to

reflect on their own self-construction as a practitioner, they seem to avoid the awareness that an examination of themselves as a design educator can bring. If the uncertainty of emerging vision is accepted as important in this diverse studio environment, educational honesty and the ability to reflect on our own ignorance is imperative. We must open our minds to others and this includes other disciplines.

Just as first year students are introduced to the importance of 'seeing', educators must also be re-introduced to many of the important lessons gained from learning to look. Vision and sight are both inward as well as outward actions, they are not simply about 'seeing' the external world. Students and educators often arrive at the first year experience with imagination extinguished and vision corrupted. The majority of students and educators have been through an educational milieu that is focused on non-reflective, hierarchical, positivist teaching and learning educational systems. Many also believe that there are other visions, other ways of living that have motivated them to engage in design education at post-secondary institutions. However, Meadows, Meadows, & Randers observe that "...some people have been so crushed by their experience of the world that they can only stand ready to explain why any vision is impossible."⁸ Likewise, design studio educators often incite students to mimic and then enact an approach that they experienced when they went through design school and were themselves educationally indoctrinated. This form of cultural reproduction is a way of learning to look that replicates and perpetuates a certain way of design, and ultimately of practice. The everyday, 'every year' lived world of both educators and students can be challenged by encouraging a shift into multiple viewpoints. Learning to look from the position of not only an impartial observer but of a participant who investigates one's own experience, while questioning and examining constructed fabrications and self mythologies, can animate new visions and new ways of interpreting the world. The problem suggests that studio is 'stuck' in the Beaux-Arts tradition, but of course it is not. The beginning design studio is firmly entrenched within disciplinary approaches that present fixed views of the world. Knowledge and understanding are changing, and the difficulties in embracing uncertainty and difference are hard for professionals to overcome.

Educators who demand that the minds of beginning design students be treated as *tabulae rasae* set up a dangerous teaching model in the first year studio. According to Leamson, "we can restore, we can repair damage, but we can't undo history. There is nothing to be gained therefore, by dwelling on our students' prior schooling. ... The more a thing has been neglected, the greater the satisfaction in bringing it to a state of usefulness or beauty."⁹ For design educators who subscribe to this reductionist view of learning, this notion is highlighted as truth. For they believe that few students have experienced educational or life events which prepare them for the acquisition of concepts and skills, of the verbal and visual vocabulary, and the cultural induction required of the first year studio. This viewpoint is reflected by the following passage by a former design student. "We were expected to unlearn

everything we absorbed in high school and before. It was assumed that nothing we had done before resembled thinking...Essentially, we were asked to forget most things in our past, to come to the studio "naked," to allow ourselves to be directed by the professors who claimed unquestionable authority in our focused world."¹⁰ Each student potentially arrives at the first year studio with a unique set of skills and abilities that can enhance the acquisition of new forms of experience, and eventually – new visions for design practice. However, because so much earlier schooling is fixed on the fragmentation of subjects, some educators and students see prior knowledge as separate from or irrelevant to current learning. They are often reluctant to reconsider many of these basic skills and concepts. First year students are particularly vulnerable to teaching practices that characterize the educator as the sole source of relevant knowledge. Feigenberg confirms that much architectural education has been structured according to this paradigm. "The teacher-student relationship is generally one in which the teacher is regarded as the primary source of knowledge and the student as the passive receiver."¹¹ When students' existing understandings are banished from the studio, rather than critically examined, students develop 'blind spots'. Students are then operating from a light source that flattens their perspective. Revisiting and re-imagining experiences are crucial components in developing students emerging vision. As Varela, Thompson and Rosch have stated, "thus in reflection we find ourselves in a circle."¹² Learning to look requires educators and students to be reflective. The reflective self is in a continual state of ebb and flow - reaching out to the world and in turn being altered by what is found there. Beginning design educators guide this journey.

Devaluing prior experience sets up an atmosphere of learning which often succeeds in stripping away the confidence of 'beginning design' students during a year of great emotional and intellectual upheaval. Educators in first year programs witness the loss of identity that students undergo as they travel up the slippery slope of learning. The erosion of personal boundaries and mythologies that occurs during the first year experience, leave students scrambling to relocate themselves within their changing understanding of the world. Although moments of crisis can be immensely painful for beginning design students, they are the points at which emerging knowledge and existing understandings can potentially shift, spiral, and reform'. Kincheloe has stated that "when we learn why we see what we see, we are thinking about thinking, analyzing the forces that shape our consciousness, placing what we perceive in a meaningful context."¹³ As students critically re-examine what they know, they come to deeper understandings of who they are, and gain the confidence to move forward emotionally and intellectually within the educational milieu.

A view of the world and the self through multiple lenses of self and of society, potentially encourages thoughtful interpretations of both nature and culture that foster a creative, connective vision within the self and the lived world, rather than imposing a culturally reproduced vision of the world.

According to Levin, "our vision is not just a biological endowment; it is also a capacity, a potential that can be developed and realized in a number of different ways. ... Vision is socially produced and tends to confirm and reproduce the culture that brought it into being."¹⁴ The importance of the reflective practitioner has long been lauded in the design studio. However, the practical reflection on the importance of the collaboration that occurs in everyday design practice must be encouraged. The development and emergence of personal and shared vision that begin to embrace the other - including the other disciplines in environmental design is important. By inviting students to view the world and the self through multiple lenses of self, educators may encourage the development of truly reflective designers who begin to imagine thoughtful, creative built form from a critical interpretation of nature and culture. This could result in an emerging connective vision within the self and the lived world, rather than the imposition of a culturally reproduced view of the world that we created.

Learning to see requires practice, risk-taking, and a deliberate awakening of conscious perception. Vision which can be interpreted as an integrated human capacity that emerges from the world of lived experience, is participatory and engaged rather than detached and observatory. Learning to look - vision - is deeply subjective, emerging from experience and critical consciousness. When vision becomes clear, educators and students become aware of what was once hidden, lost, or invisible to them. In particular we see this awakening beginning in the assigned journal reflections that accompany each beginning environmental design studio brief. Many of the students feel safer exploring their developing ideologies in the design journals/sketchbooks than through their design interventions or during critique sessions. Students may not be aware that they are experiencing an emerging vision. It most often becomes apparent when they re-visit their studio work and journals at moments of reflection. Observations from a studio instructor's journal seem to confirm this:

We met next on September 12th. With terrorist attacks weighing heavily on all of our minds, the initial conversation circled around the events of September 11. Students seemed reluctant to engage in a dialogue about the tragedy, although certainly each had a comment to share. I was initially disappointed in the day. I thought the magnitude of the events would create a common ground within the group, which would enable a lively dialogue to take place. Perhaps it was just too soon. Were two days of conversation just too talking and not enough learning?

Sometime later, as I read through the students' reflective journals, I discovered that something wonderful had occurred during those studios. Students wrote of "homecomings", of finally finding a place to belong, to discover, and to learn to see new things. These early days of conversation were the foundations for our community of learning. By honoring our stories, sharing our sorrow and our hopes for a brighter future, we began in trust.¹⁵

Awakened vision requires a response. Students must become

"aware of their temporality, their situatedness in history and of their reality as being capable of transformation through action in collaboration with others."¹⁶ Educators must teach learners to balance their vision with action, channeling 'seeing' as a force against fear, and isolation, (that so often occurs in the beginning design studio) and non-sustainable practices (that so often occurs in the pedagogy of beginning design). Learning to look in a conscious, participatory and critical manner educates individuals to be empowered and activated by emerging vision of what the world could be.

NOTES

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- ² von Meiss, Pierre. *Elements of Architecture, From Form to Place*, (London: E & FN Spon, 1986, 1991), 125
- ³ Dutton, Thomas A. "The Hidden Curriculum and the Design Studio: Toward a Critical Studio Pedagogy", in *Voices in Architectural Education, Cultural Politics and Pedagogy*, Thomas A. Dutton, ed. (New York: Bergin & Garvey, 1991), 166
- ⁴ Fuller, Timothy. *The Voice of Liberal Learning*, Michael Oakeshott on Education, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), 10
- ⁵ University of Manitoba, Graduate Calendar, 2001/2002, 72
- ⁶ Nicol, David and Simon Pilling eds. *Changing Architectural Education, Towards a New Professionalism*, (London: Spon Press, 2000)
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- ¹⁰ Willenbrock, Laura L. "An Undergraduate Voice in Architectural Education", In Thomas Dutton, ed. *Voices in Architectural Education: Cultural Politics and Pedagogy*, (New York: Bergin & Garvey 1991), 97-98
- ¹¹ Feigenberg, Alan. "Learning to Teach and Teaching to Learn", In Thomas Dutton (ed.) *Voices in Architectural Education: Cultural Politics and Pedagogy*. (New York: Bergin & Garvey, 1991), 265
- ¹² Varela, F.J., Thompson, E. & Rosch, E. *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1991, 3
- ¹³ Kincheloe, Joe L. "Pinar's Curriere and Identity in Hyperreality: Grounding the Post-Formal Notion of Intrapersonal Intelligence", In W.F. Pinar (Ed.), *Curriculum : Toward New Identities*. (New York: Garland, 1998), 134
- ¹⁴ Levin, D. *The absent body*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 9-10
- ¹⁵ Notes from Karen Wilson Baptists' studio journal, Term One, 2001-2002

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