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Learning to be an Architect: The office and the studio

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Summary

In this paper I draw on research from a Department for Universities, Innovation & Skills (DIUS) funded project for development of practice-based learning study routes as a component of the fourth and fifth years of full-time Architecture education in the UK. The aims of the project were to develop curricula that would enable students to keep the benefits of full-time student status while working part-time and gaining some of their academic credit through practice-based learning, drawing on this paid work. Even though practising architects had been consulted as the project proposal developed, focus groups with practitioners as the project developed, revealed some deep concerns with the basis of the project. They saw part-time employees as problematic for the way their practices worked, and were concerned that students would not get valuable learning experiences while in the office on this basis. In addition, both the academics and the practitioners interviewed thought that practice-based learning was likely to compromise the quality of architecture graduates. In this paper I attempt to understand this rather surprising finding.

After setting out the context of the project, and of architecture practice and education in the UK, I use Wenger's (1998) concept of Communities of Practice as an heuristic to explore patterns of interaction and distance between these two groups, and consider the privileged position given to the academic design studio and its role in professional identity formation by these practising and academic architects.

Introduction

This paper draws on focus group interviews within an educational development project, called *Learn and Earn: Practice-based learning for Architecture Part 2*. The project was jointly funded by the Department for Innovation, Universities & Skills (DIUS); the Centre for Excellence in Professional Learning from the Workplace at the University of Westminster and the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA). The DIUS funding was offered to professions, which had been identified by them (Langlands, 2005) as likely to be at risk of falling registration and decreasing diversity following the introduction of significant fee-levels for undergraduate students in the UK in 2006. The project was led by the Standing Conference of Heads of Schools of Architecture (SCHOSA) with university architecture schools and architecture practices as project partners. The aim of the project was to develop "fit for context" models of practice-based learning capable of supporting the needs of students, architecture schools and practice employers, and to find ways of addressing the rapidly changing educational needs of the profession. (These are outlined below). The purpose of the focus groups was to inform this curriculum development by illuminating what might be acceptable to teach side. Groups rather than individual interviews were chosen so ideas put forward could be critiqued by the group, and practitioners and academics were interviewed in separate groups so that their separate perspectives could emerge.

The academic group was made up of SCHOSA members, or their delegates, who were already working closely with architecture practices in a range of ways including practice-based learning, and included one head of a part-time programme. The practitioners were recruited from architecture practices who worked with the schools of architecture who had expressed an interest in the project. All were from what are referred to in the transcripts as design-led rather than commercial practices, but ranged from small partnerships to large international companies. The interviews were conducted by an architect member of the project team and who had recently moved from practice to academia, and so had authenticity with both groups. Each group was asked to comment on their perceptions of the numbers of people coming into the profession and their readiness for employment, whether they thought diversity was an issue, whether the Part 2 curriculum ought to be generalist, or allow for or encourage specialisms, and what might be the advantages and issues of working with the other group in some sort of joint endeavour over the curriculum. Questions were circulated in advance so that participants had the opportunity to think them over and to discuss with colleagues. The transcripts were code using NVIVO software using categories from the interview schedule, but also coding for learning in architecture school and learning in the office.

I will briefly outline the pressures currently facing the Architecture profession in the UK, before moving on to apply the concept of Communities of Practice (Wenger, 2998) as an heuristic to explore separate focus group interviews with experienced architecture academics and practitioners who work with architecture schools. I propose that the academic design studio, which is the signature pedagogy (Shulman, 2005) for architecture education in the UK is consider by both groups to be the field in which the identity or habitus (Hodgkinson et al, 2008) of architects is best developed, and that what I will call the creative capital of the profession might be put at risk if practice-based learning were introduced as the norm. The office environment was considered by both groups to work against the essential learning of design, even though both groups recognised similar areas where the office would offer the richer learning environment, in that students could draw on data sets and records of the practice.

The educational context

The route to professional entry for architecture in the UK is mapped out by the Architects Registration Board as 3 stages. In general the pattern comprises five years of full-time education and two years supervised work experience:

- An undergraduate degree (Part 1), followed by a year out in practice;
- Two further years of full-time education usually validated as a Graduate Diploma (Part 2) of which 50% is focused on design;
- One or two years to in supervised practice to complete a competency-based professional portfolio (Part 3).

This process can be completed in seven years, but it is common for people to take longer, with nine to ten years currently the norm. The framework has been in place for roughly fifty years. SCHOSA has successfully argued that the Part 2 qualification should be funded as undergraduate education, which provides higher per capita government funding than a Masters degree. If studying full-time, these Part 2 students also have the right to student loans. However, with the level of fees introduced in 2006, even students who work part-time seem to amass at least £10,000 of debt per year of full-time

undergraduate education¹. As these students get to the point of deciding whether to register for Part 2 study (2009/10) there is concern that debt levels will impact on the numbers and diversity of people continuing with architecture education. At present, the majority of Part 2 students choose to study full-time², and a survey in five schools of architecture, which was undertaken as part of the Learn & Earn project³, suggested that up to one third work part-time in architecture offices. From these perspectives, the introduction of practice-based learning with students earning a salary and some of the curriculum delivery drawing on their practice experience, would seem to work towards a sustainable solution for students and architecture schools alike.

The practice context

Only UK registered architects can fulfil the contracting role in an architecture practice. However, architecture practices range from sole traders to large multinational partnerships, to multinational construction companies which have architecture as an aspect of this business. Much of the work in an architectural office is done by experienced people who are not registered architects and some of these people are very highly regarded in the profession. Practices also employ architecture degree graduates in junior and technical roles in the year out between Parts 1 and 2, and there is evidence (*footnote 3 - above*) that a number keep in contact with students who fit the ethos of the practice. In some cases this involves supporting their fee costs and giving them work while they study; in others it involves the offer of a job should the student wish to come back on completion of their Part 2. However, these are individual arrangements between the practice and the student. There is no culture of practices retaining students while they study for Part 2 as is found in other professions such as law.

The architecture profession is extremely vulnerable to fluctuations in the economy, and although it had been experiencing a fifteen year period of considerable expansion, the construction industries in the UK went into a rapid downturn at the end of 2008. The focus groups reported here took place before this down turn, and so although it had been predicted, the participants were talking in the context of full employment. The UK architecture profession is also facing a new planning and regulatory framework for the energy-efficiency and sustainability of buildings and increasing demands for evidence-based practice. The president of the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA), Sunand Prasad (2008) talks of the need for collaborative working between practice and academia as the route to meeting these challenges:

As in other industries, academia in the built environment is often ahead of practice. But in other industries there is a quicker route for knowledge and innovation from academia to practice, and more focus in education on the realities of practice. Unfortunately the neglect of technology, cost and sustainability in architectural education threatens to emasculate young architects.

(Prasad, 2008)

For RIBA, as the professional body for architecture, there is a need to change the relationship between academia and practice, for academia to take a lead on innovation

¹ Information supplied by the University of Westminster Scholarships Office. The UK Funding Council will report on debt levels for the first cohort of undergraduates to complete under the new fee levels later this year.

² Information supplied by SCHOSA

³ Survey into the work patterns, income, and demographics of Architecture Part 2 students.

and research, and for architecture graduates to have a greater grounding in practice. Therefore, for students, architecture schools and for the profession, practice-based learning would seem to offer sustainable solutions.

Relationships between architecture education and practice emerging from the study

The intention of this inquiry is to explore the relationships, sense-making and priorities of the educators and the practitioners in the interviews, using Wenger's (1998, 73-85) Communities of Practice. From that starting point I will consider the boundaries between these two domains and the affordances for developing a joint enterprise around practice-based learning. Wenger describes three dimensions of 'community' – shared repertoire, mutual engagement and joint enterprise – which he sees as overlapping and cross-evidencing. He describes mutual engagement as doing things together, relationships and community maintenance, but says that the things that are done will, in part, be joint enterprises with mutual accountability, and negotiated roles and rhythms. These interactions and activities, he argues, will sit within and reference to a repertoire of shared meanings, stories, artefacts and discourses. The exploration of the boundaries and overlap that emerge from a starting point of notionally separate communities will lead into discussion of how these groups seem to think about architecture education, and their readiness to engage with practice-based learning as a means to progress in meeting the challenges outlined above.

Shared repertoires?

Both transcripts showed a strong shared repertoire around the academic architecture studio as an incubator for ideas and architectural thinking, and a place where students could and ought to be able to take risks. For both groups this sat next to concerns that the practice environment did not generally afford these openings to students. In talking about practice-based learning one practitioner said – *there are things that are missing, you know. The opportunities for those people that work better, or, you know, can fly free in terms of their thinking away from practice. It would be a shame to lose that completely⁴.....* – This is mirrored by the academics as – *[It's] about unpacking everything you've learned, and then hopefully, by the time you leave, you've re-packed in a way that you understand how you work, and that means you have to take risks. That means that you have to learn things and do things that you wouldn't normally do in order to find out.* – They both see architecture as an immersive practice. Academics talk of students doing all-nighters to complete assessment tasks, while a practitioner's reason for not wanting to use students as part-time workers was because he couldn't fully involve them in the work. – *he [a student this practice employed] can come in a day or three days depending on his course work, but you know, you can't – you haven't got time to integrate him into anything at all. I mean, we like to give him a little nugget, but..* – Both groups also told stories of students in practice sometimes being stuck in boring or repetitive roles, described as – *stuck making the tea.*

Both these groups talked about an 'Architect' in terms and through stories that strongly equated with design over and above the other aspects of the role, and the artefact for mediating this identity development was the studio. When the practitioners started to

⁴ Passages in italics are taken from the interview transcripts.

imagine what their engagement in practice-based learning would look and what might be the barriers, their assumptions led them to talk about making a protected area of the office and of the non-viability of taking a senior person away from fee earning work. – *if you're going to have this system ... then somebody should be able to walk in, robustly, and say you're actually just farting around and wasting the government's money because you're not – you're just abusing these people. Or say that's amazing, that special unit you've got over there, where they're clearly not on any fee paid work and you are giving them your fantastic teaching skills 50% of the time.*

Mutual engagement and overlapping practices?

Practicing architects are an integral part of the studio model. They critique students' design presentations, take a role in examining final assessment submissions and contribute to the delivery of the Part 2 programme in a number of ways. In respect of their motivations for interaction with schools of architecture, practitioners in the focus group talked of students as sources of ideas – *A.. is going to be putting students on a housing scheme....and inevitably he will see some fresh ideas that could easily find their way back into our practice.* They also spoke of their engagement with the creativity in schools and students as a means of self-renewal – *you get your head out of the trench and you start looking at other ways of doing things, and you're exposed to people doing things in quite different ways and you end up being refreshed.* – One academic described this attachment to the intellectual life of the studio as – *the sort of hard-nosed practitioner, puts their foot through the door and suddenly any sense of reality becomes lifted from their shoulders* – Practitioners also saw contact with students as a productive recruitment avenue to the extent that a Part 2 graduate who related to the ethos of the practice might be seen as a more desirable recruit than someone with expertise who was unknown to the practice. – *We've had a few people join us recently and... it takes them a while to understand what we're doing. So having people who are mentally, geared up to be part of the practice, even if they've been away for a year, is actually hugely useful.*

Beyond this engagement around students some Architecture Schools were identified as offering practical research, and there was agreement that this was an area where Schools could offer a firm benefit to practice. I will return to this under 'Joint enterprise'. Primarily, the practitioners valued the Part 2 student's *skills as an architect*. They did not seem to be concerned with the types of projects that a student had focussed on, or the standard employability skills agenda, but to be looking for – *initiative, inquisitive, willing to learn .. all sort of self made rather than taught* – and their engagement focussed on students and design rather than the academics themselves or the curriculum in general.

The academic practitioners talked in quite bounded terms about their relationships with architecture practice – *our contracts are with our students, and that's an important point of reference for me.* – and – *I think it's probably not a good thing for schools of architecture to do deals with super practices, or any kinds of practices, over and above the consideration of their students.* – They talked about academic space as – *why people go to university, you know. It isn't to become an architect, or to behave like an architect in the sense of someone sitting in a practice. It's actually to think about architecture with a little bit of kind of, you know, room around it.* – and in a sense they saw it as the student's role to set how the two domains interacted – *I mean, in a sense, if there is a symbiosis with practice, they choose to make it, and if they don't want one, they choose not to make it, and that's the way I'd like to keep it.* They recognised a

difference in how, or what, learning was valued in each domain – *when they are in the office they learn what the office wants them to learn, and when they're in the university we teach them what we think they should know.* – and, speaking of part-time students – *it's that difference between the real world and education, and how we're trying to get them to think.* There was a general concern that, if more openings were made for practitioners to get involved in the curriculum, they would all want to teach design, and a general feeling that practitioners did not appreciate the effort that goes into developing students. – *most practices would have a huge shock if they realised the amount of resource that goes into getting students competencies up to the level that they're at.*

Although practitioners and schools of architecture seemed to be mutually engaged in the architect student's creativity and design development, which both see as the essential qualities of an architect, their roles and responsibilities within this did not seem to reflect mutual engagement so much as to co-exist and intersect.

Shared or separate enterprises?

The academic practitioners saw their primary enterprise as developing what they saw as academic competence. .. *so I don't know that, even if you're doing a Part 2 course, you're necessarily saying OK, well we're training you to be a professional per se. What you're doing is you're taking things from a professional context and your putting them into an academic context so that people would learn ... they would actually develop, if you like, a different kind of knowledge and competence which they then apply in a professional context.*

The practitioners, although they shared the understanding that schools were rightly focused on developing design and creativity, and joined in that enterprise, were also aware that this was only part of the role of the architect, and that with the emerging expectations of practice, that this might become problematic. One practitioner said – *what I'm interested in is architecture plus something else as well. If you can bring some management, or bring some construction knowledge or ... you know, that would be really interesting to us.* – Although they too were concerned with quality, it was with respect to individuals rather than academic criteria. They were looking for people who would fit in to their ethos – *she's just, all the time, you know, going for it. Sometimes I'm just sort of amazed how quickly that happens [laughter] and I don't know that that's one of the things that's valued in architectural schools very much.*

As has been shown, practitioners had considerable contact with Part 2 students and the academic environment. However, these academics talked of many full-time academics having little contact with practice settings. Visits to students during the year in practice between Parts 1 and 2 were said to often be given to visiting lecturers. This might have been due to the lack of availability of academic staff time to cover these visits, but the result was that academics seemed to have little contact with office practitioners outside their own environment.

One area where there seemed to be potential for emerging forms of joint enterprise was in the area of research. Architecture practice is under increasing pressure for evidence-based design – *no one has time to reflect sufficiently on what you've just done* – and one practitioner proposed – *design projects to actually look at what are the impacts of new legislation going to be on design.* – and – *It would teach students to put a degree of rigour in what they do, which is essential to practice, and essential to , you know,*

good quality academic activity. – The academics also recognise the potential of practice as a – *data store. If you want a resource it's there, it's better than a library. You can actually talk to some one, find out what letters were written.* – Some architecture schools are beginning to offer research services to the profession, but the primary interest of these interviewees was still in enriching the curriculum. Developing this agenda will be a departure for both groups, and require different forms of engagement and different repertoires. However, at present, even though these practitioners and academics recognise that new professional competencies are emerging, this has not yet interrupted their commitment to the studio model as the means for developing the essential skills and creativity of an architect.

Looking at how academics and practitioners talk about architecture education through the lens of Communities of Practice has shown mutual engagement in school-based pedagogies, with practitioners as 'visitors' into the academic domain. They have developed an established role in academic practices, which gives them access to students for ideas and recruitment, and to refresh themselves as architects. However, practice in their workplaces remains peripheral to the curriculum.

The professional identity of architects

As can be seen in the analysis above, there is a strong attachment for both these groups of academics and practitioners to what Lee Shulman (2005) of the Carnegie Foundation calls the signature pedagogy of the design studio. Shulman and the Carnegie Foundation have developed the concept of signature pedagogies to describe educational practices in teaching styles, room layouts, and expectations of teacher / student interaction that focus on and mirror the key working practices for a profession. The studio as used in architecture and engineering schools is one of his examples. He argues that the purpose of the signature pedagogy is to instruct novices "in critical aspects of three fundamental dimensions of professional work – to *think*, to *perform*, and to *act with integrity*" (2005:52 – his italics) Through this process, he argues, the pedagogies routinise and simplify the dauntingly intellectual, creative and performance challenges of their particular professional practices. However, in establishing these scaffolds, they also create resistant to change and can distort learning. Whatever cannot be squeezed into the framework tends to be ignored or at least marginalised. There are significant changes facing architecture practice, and in particular the need for research into how to design to the new planning directives, and deliver the expectations for evidence-based practice. These new repertoires and patterns of engagement have not yet developed, and this may be to some extent because current educational practices do not lend themselves to this sort of learning. It is doubtful that the signature pedagogy of studio learning, which developed to fulfil the purpose of nurturing design skills and creativity, will serve the needs of this emerging research agenda and the developing expectations for evidence-based practice, or sit comfortably with practice-based learning.

Shulman's argument for signature pedagogies argues for structures over individual agency as the mechanism for learning. While much that aligns with his argument can be seen in the analysis above, it does not explain the resistance to the idea of practice-based learning, as different from misunderstandings as to how it might operate, that is found in the transcripts, even though these communities were nominally supportive of the Learn and Earn project. Another, and I think more helpful way of looking at the

attachment these academics and practitioners have for the studio is through the concept of a learning culture. Hodgkinson et al (2008), drawing on the work of Bourdieu (1985) describes a learning culture as a field: a social space where there is inequality of resources which include social and cultural as well as economic capital, and where people are in competition. There are rules and potential for the forming and reforming of alliances, and fields working within and across each other at a number of levels. In the design studio each student brings different mixes of social, cultural, economic, and in very relevant to this case, creative capital. The studio, as the academics acknowledge, leaves them free to develop alliances and their own style and priorities. Each person, or learner will inhabit a number of fields that interact with the field at the primary focus of the learning, and will interact differently as a consequence of different dispositions, intentions, their various forms of capital, and in response to others in the field. There is agency but not all positions are available to the learner. This personal make-up can be called the habitus (Bourdieu) or identity. The architecture studio, viewed as a learning culture, would be the field of identity formation and reformation for the students and architects within it. The practitioners talked of being refreshed in terms of ideas through contact with the learning environment. They looked for students with the kind of creative and other capital, and dispositions that would fit with their practice. Hodgkinson proposes “becoming” as the metaphor that best fits this sort of embodied learning. The architecture students become particular types of architects through their participation in the studio. However, I would argue that it is not just the students who are embodying the habitus of an architect through their participation in this field. The practitioners and academics, continue to interact in and with the field to refresh and reform themselves, and to sustain the creative capital of their practices and of the profession itself. The academics who work with part time students saw it as their responsibility to enable students to unpick pragmatic habits and reform themselves, and in so doing there is a sense that they see themselves as reproducing the habitus of the profession itself.

Conclusions

Architecture is a profession where there is considerable diversity in how it is practised. I have argued, following Hodgkinson et al (2008), that the academic studio that is the focus of design-development, or 50% of the second stage, of architecture education is seen by academics and the practitioners who work with them to be an essential feature in the development and maintenance of the identity of an architect, and of architecture itself. I propose that the strength of this learning culture as shown through the interviews with practicing architects and academics in this study may be inhibiting thinking around how practice-based learning might be used to develop the culture of evidence-based practice that is increasing expected from the professional body and from the regulatory environment. This would suggest, that changes designed to progress the “focus in education on the realities of practice” as called for by the current RIBA president (Prasad, 2008) will need to work with the academic studio as the predominate learning culture rather than against it, or as some form of separate practice-based learning development for the areas of the curriculum not overtly included in creative design.

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