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Teaching Creativity: Developing Experimental Design Studio Curricula for Pre-College and Graduate Level Students in China

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Abstract

This paper attempts to demonstrate challenges and opportunities in design education in greater China, by focusing on two diverse steps of teaching design creativity, while depicting experimental design curricula. Two programs have been run in two different universities in Hong Kong and in Shanghai. Both cases tackle with deployment of unconventional content that departed from the methodology used to-date on the particular programs or level of education, in an attempt to generate alternatives of conventional teaching patterns.The initial discussion is articulated around the Summer Program in Architecture at The University of Hong Kong, which aimed to teach design and creativity to an audience with minimum to none previous experience and encourage them to choose this path as well as the particular institution for their further education. The second part is conveyed through a Graduate Studio at the College of Architecture and Urban Planning at Tongji University in Shanghai, which aimed to explore connections between use of crafts and digital processes in architecture design and form making.In both programs, design tasks are based on basic perception levels of space and form, which have been investigated progressively by students, through correlated workshops and lecture topics that have been also discussed in the sub-sections. The paper is concluded by emphasizing the improvement of students' abilities, skills and expertise in relation to the diversity of the groups.

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Keywords: Teaching Creativity, Experimental Studio, Pre-College Design Education, Graduate Studio Education, Architectural Education, China.

1. Introduction

Departing from the challenges of teaching design creativity in a potentially closed, static and didactic education system, this work intends to reflect the agenda of experimental design education programs being developed, avoiding repetition of any cliché or the stereotypical education methods. Being run at the University of Hong Kong and Tongji University, this work conveys the diverse studio structures and output by discussing them through consequent sub-sections.

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The discussion starts with depicting the teaching goals and design agenda that have been immensely affective in the curriculum development of each program. The discussion is continued by mapping the teaching strategies and assignments of each program, and concludes with closing remarks.

2. Teaching Goals and Agenda

With an attempt to reflect the benefits of experimental processes as well as opposing to the existing didactic education patterns, and creating alternatives, both pre-College and graduate level programs have been configured around certain guiding principles.

As the top-down "push" model of "spoon-feeding", the education environment has difficulty to enable an interactive, self-paced environment that is driven by participation, "Establishing Critical Thinking" emerges as the vital principle in the education agenda. To maintain the basis of 'thinking on' architecture idea, an interactive "pull" model is adapted, to encourage students in terms of expressing their ideas and comments about themselves or their team-mates' more interactively through pin-ups, as well as interim reviews or informal inter-group discussions. A voting system is also included during and after reviews to have students select their most and least favorite, which is further catalyzing the peer-critique environment.

On the other hand, building up on the previous principle, "Initiation of Basic Observation Skills" appears as the other key principle in the education agenda. The design exercises tried to enable students to look, see and understand things around them in order to use it as a part of an idea or solution they are developing. Both explicitly during lectures, workshops and fieldtrips, as well as implicitly during studio, teaching team helped students sharpening their observation skills by amplifying critical thinking.

"Improving Individual Expression" is another principle that was being able to realize by promoting teamwork, keeping studio assignments brief but branched-out. A number of exercises and reviews have been generated to enrich students' presentation skills, while giving them opportunities to improve and invent their own expression ways.

Nevertheless, "Encouraging a Personal Design Vision" has also acted as one of the crucial principles. Being one of the critical pedagogic goals in programs, teaching teams refrain to give explicit directions to student. Leaving students more room to react has enabled students see different aspects of the design problem and encouraged them to make 'mistakes' as they discover, where their natural strengths and weaknesses lie.

Last but not the least; "Building Multi-disciplinary Links" enabled the curriculum to have the presence of major fields of design. Students are intensely exposed to range of lectures and workshops. These of course are intimately related with the knowledge and ontology of architecture. Bringing these diverse fields together automatically allowed programs for potential contribution opportunities within the community. The intentional scheduling and controlled outline of lectures implicitly enabled students connect architecture into different domains.

3. Teaching Design Creativity in Pre-College Level

Since its inception in 2004, the summer program in architecture at the University of Hong Kong (HKU) has attracted students, who are interested in architecture as a future career as well as life as a student in HKU. For the first time in year 2009, the program got a complete makeover in content: Instead of having two 'architectural projects' over three weeks, the program is divided into six small, but inter-connected segments, which enable students have better integration with notion of space through gradual cognition of flexible spatial relations, as well as body and time.

The education system in China, mainly structured around the examination processes, instead of an individualistic focus on enhancing personal strengths, where secondary education students need to take a series of tests to determine their tertiary education based on assessment authority's directives. One of the main goals of the makeover was creating an alternative to this environment, a program focusing to assess and develop students' natural abilities to help them make the right decision for their future. Thus the idea of 'thinking on' architecture, rather than 'teaching

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