Towards Improving The Students' Learning In First Year Architecture Studio - The Critique Session

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Abstract- This paper explores the use of criticism in the architectural design studio. Criticism is a very useful tool in the communication of ideas and the evaluation of designs, yet its application in design studios has not reached its full potential in architecture. The first-year design studio has an important role to play as the basis for architectural education. In crucial sessions, first-year architecture students are expected to focus on their work independently, with peers and, most importantly with design tutors, for the first time in their learning experience. This interaction contributes significantly to their learning process. However, some design tutors may neglect the fact that this architectural studio culture, which involves presentation and criticism, is not an educational environment familiar to most first-year students before admitted to the architecture school. Many interactions are considered highly rewarding by readers, while others are considered highly unsatisfactory. This paper is the subject of a solution to this apparent contradiction. The role of the author is explored, with emphasis on the need to explicitly set critical objectives to help first-year learners become aware of the learning process. The paper aims at encouraging more appropriate assertiveness and skills in today's academic career, as well as to enhance the critical learning process.

Index Terms- Architecture, Critique, Design, Studio, Students Learning.

I. INTRODUCTION

The architecture studio is still widely viewed as a focal point in the curriculum of architectural education, a framework around which other courses are intertwined as channels of support for Yagiz and Dagli, (2001). In other words, the common feature of all design projects is that they all require students to apply their previous knowledge and skills to 'real' design challenges by imitating 'true' professional practice. For the duration of the project, each design studio will be run by three to four staff members, who will set up the projects for the duration of the project and work with the student community for two days a week. Architecture Studio's traditional pedagogy explores new design spaces by making use of substantial interactions between teacher and student. Interim Criticism involves analysis of the work in progress, while 'final Criticism' requires presentation and evaluation of the final work (in this article, the abbreviation term 'crit' is used).

The foundation marks the beginning of the academic year that follows, and the start of the design studio brings with it a significant mission not only for this time, but also for the overall experience of architectural education. The fact that this year students not only learn the basic skills and information needed for design, but also gain a first understanding of their future roles and responsibilities makes this year's design a special Webster, (2001). However, the culture of architectural studio which requires presentation and criticism is not an experience familiar to most first-year students prior to arriving in architecture school. Hence, without a proper role played by the tutor, a positive learning experience as a result of crit session cannot be developed. A recent study has argued that the crit all too often fails to achieve its objective. Anthony talks about the confrontational nature of crits and the difficulties that this can cause when trying to develop a positive learning experience (1991); as cited by Parnell and Sara, (2000). To add to this quandary, students do not realize that it is not favourable to learning when they keep on being reluctant to participate in discussions and becoming too defensive in their presentation of work. Thus, the paper aims at exploring the role of the design tutor with emphasis on the need to make crit objectives explicit to help first-year students become aware of the learning process and to discuss on other means to improve the learning potential of the crit.

II. EXPERIMENTAL LEARNING THEORY

The crit can be considered as an experimental learning technique, where students are expected to learn, or gain understanding, from being involved in the event. The importance of this principle needs to be emphasized in order to understand its ramifications for the design instructor's position. Boud and Pascoe, (1978); as cited by Parnell and Sara, (2000) describes the key principles of experimental education in relation to design crit as: "the crit needs to engage the full attention of each student, the

purpose of the crit needs to be made explicit with relevance to professional practice, students need to have control over their own crit experiences to integrate the experience with the way they do things, and to experience the results of their decision".

In addition, Schon (1987); as quoted by Ochsner, (2000) states that such crits may be in the form of a saying, or both, depending on the preferences of the tutor. An important part of these crits is that the professor should carefully consider what the students want to know, their questions and what they want to know. Schon also points out that the attitude of the teacher and the reaction of the students are being developed as a response to the situation and to action. The loop is called a reflection in motion. In particular, he emphasized the importance of reflective dialog with the tutor in helping students to consider both the accuracy of their actions and the degree of congruence between what they say and what they do.

III. ADAPTING THE CRIT CULTURE IN DESIGN STUDIO

To decide on the role of tutors in the first year design studio through the chosen training process, one should have a clear insight into the education system faced by our secondary school students. Generally in Nigeria and at Abubakar Tafawa Balewa Bauchi University, ATBU, specifically, students enter the first year of architectural education in a very strict high school or enrolment program in which self-expression and self-confidence are not permitted by any means. Often there is little scope for creativity and imaginative work in this kind of educational environment, let alone imagination. The entire method focuses on memorization and training for the university entrance test, which sought to find a simple solution rather than a thought-in-depth one. Pernell (2000) argued that most pre-university learning experiences of students are the didactic model by which a body of information is transferred from teacher to student. Surprisingly, when students arrive at the architecture school, they tend to expect that they will absorb all the subjects of the program and assume that the necessary skills will be improved. In architectural education, this is an important issue that can resonate very well with students who can recognize and solve problems, find solutions independently, think creatively and, most importantly, enjoy what they do. Moving from the origins of information to critical knowledge builders is dynamic and often difficult for many students.

The typical interim crit or final crit normally involves students' hanging up their work on walls and, in turn, standing in front of their drawings and models, all eyes are upon them, while making an oral presentation of their project to the design tutors. The graphic presentation often speaks for itself, but after previous tutorials, the student is expected to verbally communicate his or her concept and then engage in a dialog with the tutors. This seems to be straightforward enough, but in fact, it is not an educational experience familiar to first-year student prior to arriving in architecture school. It is inherently confusing, because the student must first deal with the fact that there is no correct answer in architecture and no correct method. The tutor will often quote students whose work is incomplete, poorly defined or unreadable, whatever the merits of the students' artistic or analytical thinking. Sometimes tutors refuse to review incomplete presentations, tell students about them, express dismay, disappointment, or even anger.

Design tutor who believe in positive reinforcement may say: "This could have been a great scheme, if only we could have seen all of it," or "One more week and this could have been fully and very successfully developed" or "It's a shame that your presentation does not do justice to your idea," or "What we see only suggests its potential quality".

On the other hand, design tutors who believe in negative reinforcement might say: "You certainly had enough time to finish this project," or "How can you ask us to review so flimsy a presentation?" or "Why do you expect us to waste our time on incomplete work?" or even worse "You are going to fail with a presentation like this."

In anticipating or even fear of being attacked, students mount heroic efforts to complete or appear to be completed when the dateline arrives. However, the tutors should be aware that, students vary considerably in their ability to pace themselves, budget time, and produce drawings and models. Some who are quick to make decisions and skillful n drawing will finish with relative ease, while others will struggle to finish. Thus, weaker students do not deserve any kind of humiliation. Lewis (1998) added that anxiety to the tutor's response is intensified because of the tremendous investment of effort, though, and creative energy made prior to the crit. Lewis further claims that:

"The student may say to him /herself, "That's not just my work hanging up there. That's me!" Consequently, the student interprets a criticism of his/her design as a criticism of him/her personally. He/she thinks, "If they don't like my work, then they don't like me!" The truth is that tutors should be evaluating the student's work, not the student as a person."

Students might well have passed a 'unhelpful' lesson to make things worse. The relationship between the student / design teacher, where the relationship represented the distance of the tutor and the lack of interest in the student and their personal inability to construct in addition accomplish learning, can be defined as weak. Weaker students noticed that they could cover up their incomprehension by following the directions of the teacher, that is, by drawing up tutorial sketches. At the end of the project, the idea belongs to the instructor and the student has lost control. However, students consider this way to ensure a good rating. In this case, as a 'expert,' the design tutor seemed to believe that teaching was a one-way process, from tutor to student (the student would learn how to design by being 'shown'), and could not recognize the student's need to build their own learning. Ramsden (1992), as Webster (2002) put it, described the outcome as low quality or 'top' learning.

Clearly, some students excel in the demanding studio setting. These individuals need little support from tutors in managing their own confounding state. Such graduates, however, understandably only number a handful. The primary objective of the tutor is to help those students who find it more difficult to turn uncertainty into a positive character and to enhance the learning of the test session. What remains is the question of how best to do this. This is what the following section attempts to illustrate.

IV.   THE ROLE OF DESIGN TUTORS

Due to the nature of the educational background of first-year students, some kind of education needs to change the role of students from accepting, listening and passive students to those who are active participants in the education cycle; Farivarsadri, (2000) indicates that this can only be achieved through a dialog based on student-centered education, rather than through a monologist or one-way transformation of knowledge. Through this discussion, the particular characteristics of the students, their experiences and their history should be respected.

In reality, the Studio project is a very suitable location for this kind of education. Studio education, in turn, focuses on, on the one hand, the interaction between students and tutors, teachers and students, and, on the other hand, positive work and criticism. The drive for learning and exploration is inherent, but it can be fed and developed. The initial design studio can be designed in such a way that students and tutors can work together to inspire learning through experimentation during the learning process.

The lab's thinking and learning should encourage and support each other. Students should take responsibility for their personal decisions, and self-criticism is an important part of that. Students should be able to question and express their work and the work of others. It is important to foster a positive view and critical thinking in students from a broader perspective when it comes to educating people who are aware of what is happening in the world around them, who are capable of resolving the current situation, of creating solutions and, at the same time, of taking responsibility for the decisions they make.

It is assumed that the crit is an exceptional learning opportunity, but does this traditional crit format offer any opportunity for student to control and ensure effective experiential learning? Do the tutors ensure that students identify the specific learning potential of the crit? As mentioned previously by the authors in section 2, Parnell and Sara, (2000) argued that if crit is to be an effective experiential learning event, then the learner needs to have control over the learning experience. It is suggested that students should be involved in defining the desired outcomes of their crit prior to the event itself, perhaps in group, or in individual tutorials. Again, this could heighten the student's awareness of the learning potential of the crit, focusing attention on specific feedback or learning areas according to the needs of the individuals. This kind of approach, which encourages student-tutor discussion of objective, could foster collaborative learning and encourage dialogue throughout a project. Perhaps most importantly, if the crit is serve as a basis for observation and reflection, then the students need to be fully involved and active in the crit process. Unfortunately the authors experienced that students have been reluctant to listen or participate in discussions as well as being too defensive in their presentation of work, thus making it not conductive to learning.

Parnell and Sara, (2000) acknowledged that lack of participation is often the result of the consciousness that work is being assessed. In addition to this, Parnell (2001) further argued that dialogue (as opposed to conversation) is a skill that needs to be learned like any other; because first-year students are so inexperienced, it is no wonder that students are hesitant to take part. Nevertheless, it was suggested that participation might be encouraged by apportioning marks for their participation in the crit discussion. Furthermore, tutors could encourage the open discussion of work by asking presenting students what they would like to change about their project. If this became an accepted component of the crit format then it could help students to break-out of the defensive mode and begin to\reflect on their work and on the process that they are engaged in. Tutors who have followed the progress of the students' work closely are particularly well-placed to offer further guidance in crit discussion.

However, the debate that takes place in tutorials and guidelines appears to concentrate mainly on the specifics of particular projects, thereby providing little opportunity to address the learning process and personal experience in the light of wider issues. It is vital to promote awareness of the overall architectural knowledge. When the crit is working at its best, it can provide an opportunity for students to develop critical awareness, to practice presentation skills, to evaluate work and to get specific feedback. Through such constructive criticism, students are given input to improve their work.

In the first year of the design lab, Farivarsadri (2001) suggested that crits be organized as community crits to allow students to participate more actively in the design process. This can also provide a stronger communication tool and enable students to see a variety of different solutions to the same design problem. That makes them aware that a single solution isn't solving the design problem. In this way, students would be mindful of more feedback from different perspectives on their own work as well as other people's work. The key thing to note in those crits is that they will lead to the works being further developed. Wedster (2001) argued that the role of the design tutor was primarily to provide constructive insight into the context of the student's design ideas and subsequent design proposals, to communicate verbally and graphically, and to use his superior expertise and skills to help students advance those ideas and to present them in the final presentation.

V.   SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In the end some mention should made on the relation of the first-year design work to that of the other years of such education or design work. Often accusations would be leveled at this first-year design studio work for many problems faced in the upper years; yet not many will be willing to be involved in the procedure of framing this course. Architectural design is the most important component of architectural education for the first year, the framework for the rest of the upper years. In the upper years, the subjects of the first year design studio should be dealt with time and time again, each time with greater complexity and enrichment at each stage.

In summary, this paper tries to emphasize the need to make the method and objectives of crit session explicit, giving students more control over the experience, construction criticism and etc. It also differentiates the importance of critiquing the student's work, as opposed to critiquing the student. In creating a learning environment, it is suggested that we should be aiming to increase students' participation in crits. Proposals include accounting for students' contribution to the discussion and opening up discussion by asking student's what they would change about their projects. One of the major points in the studio is the talent of the tutors. First-year studio project tutors should have special characteristics and awareness of design-related subjects is important, but not

enough. The teacher should have a clear knowledge of the learning process and should be able to clarify and address a number of complex design issues. He / she will be very patient and able to try out a number of different subjects and understand them. Lively teaching skills may be more important than licensure as a qualification for teaching first-years studios. In beginning of the studio, tutors should be good at instilling enthusiasm and helping students make the transition to young designers. A stiff guy in a first year studio is a disaster. Yagiz and Dagli, (2001) have put these requirements in the following words:

"Teaching beginning students is a combination of counseling, monitoring, and inspiring skills through training. Teaching of the beginning is a great responsibility to be reserved for the most mature and best prepared individual; after all, it was Louis Khan who said, 'I love beginnings!"

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