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# First year interior studies, *a studio experience* – The place between High School Certificate & tertiary studies.

## A four Year Study in a design studio setting

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First Year Interior studies, a studio experience – The place  
between Higher School Certificate & tertiary studies.

### *A four Year Study in a design studio setting*

This paper will form the *beginnings* of a research enterprise mapping notions associated with initial design studio activities in a University setting of an Interior Architecture degree at the University of New South Wales, Sydney Australia.

The first year experience in a university design course is an intricate teaching and learning experience to structure and support. The skills and attributes throughout this first year of design education form a critical underpinning of a student's future success within both the chosen design course and a future career in design. First year student's abilities to comprehend design begin at a diverse stage of development this is dependent on the extent of prior educational exposure to design teaching. The teaching of first year design must anticipate this specific level of knowledge and devise a teaching strategy for such conditions.

The first year session one design course at the University of New South Wales, Faculty of the Built Environment, Interior Architecture program, Sydney Australia has been taught since 2001 with regular modifications and improvements made based on a student and peer reflective review process. This design course *design studio one* provides students with a design alphabet of professional skills coupled with learning strategies which develop the beginnings of design attributes.

These skills and attributes provide a possibility for students to assemble future design words, statements and philosophies in years to come as part of a mature design vocabulary to confront a life within the practice of interior architecture. The first year course has now been completed by one graduate year and 4 undergraduate years still currently within the Faculty of the Built Environment, University of New

South Wales, Sydney Australia. This paper will begin to explore the workings of this learning structure in an attempt to unpack teaching and learning strategies of varying complexities. There link with professional skills and the learning and teaching synergies experienced, planned and unplanned, seen and unseen.

The four year degree course, Bachelor of interior Architecture at UNSW operates two sessions per year with the design studio subject area as the major component of the four year degree. This major area of study is supported through the first two years of the degree with additional mandatory study areas - Technology, History, Theory and Communications. Beyond the first two years design studio subjects remain the prime area of teaching and are then supported by a series of elective areas of study allowing the students to tailor design there final years within the degree course.

The first year interior course forms a nexus between the student's final year within the Australian high school setting and the second session of a University experience. This course attempts to form the beginnings of design skills and attributes within the first year student through a series of design studio experiences choreographed to entice develop and reorganize a students means of considering assessing and responding.

## SKILL

- Noun 1 the ability to do something well; expertise or dexterity. 2 a particular ability.
- verb usu. as noun skilling train (a worker) to do a particular task.

— ORIGIN Old Norse, ‘discernment, knowledge’.

skill (skɪl)

Proficiency, facility, or dexterity that is acquired or developed through training or experience. See Synonyms at ability.

- a. An art, trade, or technique, particularly one requiring use of the hands or body.
- b. A developed talent or ability: *writing skills*.

## ATTRIBUTE

- verb /əˈtrɪbyoot/ (attribute to) regard as belonging to or being caused by. noun /əˈtrɪbyoot/ 1 a characteristic or inherent quality or feature. 2 an object that represents a person, status, or office.

— DERIVATIVES attributable /əˈtrɪbyootəbəl/ adjective attribution noun.

— ORIGIN Latin *attribuere* ‘assign to’.

*Oxford English dictionary; Oxford University Press*  
Available from : <http://www.askoxford.com>  
[cited 13 March 2007].

An approach to teaching and learning that embraces design knowledge and techniques alone will not equate unconditionally to the formation of an interior architect. As at the core of what a designer possesses are more than skills or knowledge and rather a set of broad adaptive intuitive *abilities or attributes*, responding with dexterity and invention as the specific design condition necessitates.

The response to these conditions by the designer encompasses more than meets the eye, this slight of hand that is mere production is only part of an answer. The reality being, design is forged from a breadth of ideologies and methodologies pertinent to the individual design issue and concurrently the designer’s individual approach and interpretation of the specific design. These ideologies and methodologies are supported by a skill set of taught and learnt experiences and techniques. Some of these skills being visible whilst others not.

The skills which are visible tend to shaped of a tangible real output, fashioned at the hand of the designer and placed within the world clearly visible. The invisible abilities or *attributes* are not seen as a direct tangible reflection of doing but rather part of an inherent intangible quality amalgamating resourcefulness creativity and visual thinking with an

appropriate response. These abilities are held together by a flexible design dexterity - adaptability. These outputs are difficult to define consistently as are not shaped as representation and adapt from one design issue to the next as required. Thus creating *adaptability* itself as an inherent quality of each individual design approach, formed as an integral component of the individual nature of the design circumstances.

As no one design issue or situation resembles another no systematized or homogeneous design approach can be used or identified therefore taught – *a teaching and learning risk emerges*. Design solutions are infinitely diverse and as a consequence must be tailor made and specific to individual conditions. For that reason the teaching of these invisible qualities that services this diversity must be thought of in another manner other than the visible.

The skill set associated with interior architecture could initially be considered to be a derivative of other design professions skill sets. However beyond the initial development of these skills the specificity of the skill sets becomes directed and honed towards the interior architecture/design industries requirements and standards. These skills reflect the particular and specialized practice of interior architecture. The nature and quality of these skills and attributes is reflective of a design methodology that embraces an interior position of design this being an ability to construct an interior environment specific in relationship to itself - *the interior*.

These skill sets align more closely to planning sequences and spatial qualities and interior experiences than skills sets and attributes associated with urban and greater site issues of architecture. Attributes *initially* are broad-spectrum in nature focusing further as the student develops a greater understanding of the specific area of expertise that is interior architecture or design

The essential technical *skills* of a designer are able to be taught or the knowledge of these abilities expressed and demonstrated in a teaching and learning setting due to the practical and visible type of the expertise. However communicating the essence of an attribute such as adaptability in such a similar manner creates a more challenging and complex teaching and learning scenario. Given the characteristic of an attribute as something that can exist as unquantifiable due to its inherent and sometimes invisible nature, how then are these taught in a university setting built around interior architecture?

For most first year students the world around them and the world they move through have not been something to question. This can be due to age, life experience or simply a mode of operation that has not been exposed to a questioning process previously. This accepting approach to an environment and lack of questioning by the first year student forms a strong opinion of what is an *interior*. There interior environment represents a dialect that has been learnt as a language that occurs in a fixed manner, something that is known and understood as the way it is and not something to

question. The use of design specific exercises extending a first year students comprehension of there broader environment can begin to develop an ability of observation and enquiry and response beyond there current sphere of design understanding. The attribute of adaptability emerges here as a primary catalyst in an awakening within the student of possibility and difference as an acceptance of potential change and innovation.

These qualities exist as a complex conundrum relating to an understanding that for the most is identified as a component of design worldliness or design experience. Hence the term '*teaching*' may not comprehensibly signify the approach to developing an attribute such as adaptability as it is not a representable technical devise able to be simply demonstrated. The ethic of *practice makes perfect* may still however be applied to the attribute as with a technical skill, however the *practice* requires a rigor greater than hand and eye coordination. In this complex relationship between visible technical skills and invisible attributes the emergence of both abilities concurrently becomes paramount. It is this correlation between the two and there development which allows for learning expansion and success by the student in there first year of design studies.

The need to encourage and set in motion an approach of enquiry and a technical skill base within the student is seen as an essential mode of design teaching. Design education becomes only a part of this framework, alluding *partially* to a design answer or possibility or existence of. Instilling a curiosity that informs a student's knowledge of the existence of possible margins and peripheries which require exploration and identification in the pursuit of a design answer becomes the design educator's realm. Dealing with abstract notions of possibilities rather than answers defies any solution which is prescriptive hence encouraging a students own developmental design methodology that is independent and unique. This process circumnavigates and exposes students to both visible technical skills and invisible attributes. Developing an understanding within the student of this balance is imperative, without this understanding the relationship may not be formed by the student. An awareness of the potency of this learning philosophy within the student can act as a catalyst for the unfolding of the process.

The ability to anticipate possible unforeseen narratives which may or may not exist within the breadth of the design brief is an essential component of a designers own design process. The teaching and learning of this subject matter that is grounded in possibility and the unforeseeable is a difficult maneuver. Merely teaching around the issue with the hope this adaptability will be stirred from within the student maintains a high risk factor. In many cases this teaching approach can form *part* of an appropriate tact; however the probability of students not being engaged is high. Carefully choreographed and managed design opportunities encouraging and enhancing self learning act as successful methodologies in accelerating a design maturity which encompasses the attribute of adaptability.

These attributes that allow a designer to respond and reinvent adaptively appear at times far more ingrained or inherent than those of possible technical skills, which are learnt rather than activated. *The dilemma is further problematized.* The learning of technical skills is acquired at a session one first year level through hand and eye coordination developed around practical exercises repetitive in character (technical drawing, model making, etc). This method of "practice makes perfect" is a training philosophy applied and proven in many fields, the harder the skill the more practice in design specific tasks are required. The invisibility of the functions of an attribute such as adaptability creates a more complex teaching and learning dilemma requiring an approach equal to the attribute itself. Adaptability, *the ability to change or be changed*, requires the approach of practice makes perfect coupled with an additive of creative visualization and problem solving exercises diverse and complex in their composition.

This structure should broaden a students peripheral design understandings whilst encouraging a focus on the practice of adaptability itself. This specific training methodology built around broad spectrum problem solving within design complex scenarios alludes to a process of investigation and enquiry. This process intern contributes to the formation of such attributes as adaptability - as a by product - is an essential layering woven amongst the skills component of any design course. This choreographed weaving of skills and attributes, visible and invisible, within a first year design syllabus highlights a process of enquiry which is *not* at first obvious to the student. Being a type of hidden agenda within the sequenced learning promoting a self learning and resourcefulness amongst students – this resourcefulness is the beginning of an ability that is *adaptability*, a hidden inherent attribute.

Dull echoes of a designer dwell in the depths of all first year students struggling to rise to the surface. Waiting for that moment when the puzzle of the design labyrinth forms a cohesive ability of enquiry and response, signaling the awakening of a designer – *the penny drops*.

All design learning is dependent on many aspects or links in the design educations chain. The degree to which a student has an aptitude for the assimilation and synthesis of design teaching becomes paramount within this system. The ability of the student to comprehend and deal with design learning occurs at diverse intervals throughout the design studio sequence across the years of the particular degree. This phenomenon of design learning "*the design penny dropping*" can be attributed to many issues; previous education or a natural spatial awareness, life experience or level of maturity, travel and general worldliness, talent and dedication to training, passion for the genre or simply something that cannot be identified. Within design studio activities a correlation can be drawn between the design penny dropping and design skill sets and design attribute accumulation and the coherent amalgamation of the two.

Great talents seem to bubble to the surface of any learning situation enchanted with a devote capability and approach to

learning allowing a germination of design education to thrive within a first year setting. This percentage of students is not a large component and varies from year to year setting to setting. Unfortunately this same percentage also exists at the lower portion of the educational framework. However an approach to an enlivened forward thinking university experience in the design setting will forge a place within the broader design sphere for those students whose immediate design skills and talents lay further beneath the surface waiting to be realized and developed. Design courses should not enlist an approach of predictive of elitist scholarship catering at a level which denies a broader acceptance of the student who *will not* be a designer in the first year of design studies. This is further associated with the notion of the design penny, it may drop at any time throughout the curriculum of the degree *and beyond* as skills and attributes accumulation and application reaches a critical mass.

The process of designing is neither a linear progress nor something which a spoken language can communicate more effectively or clearly than that of the design itself. Therefore the educational sequence of design teaching and learning will never equate evenly to a process that attempts linearity in its structure. Designing of first year design teaching requires an active and lateral mode of composition engaging the student in a complexity of problem solving where both visible skills and invisible attributes can be explored honed and above all practiced. It is this practice that will allow these abilities to become a partnership of process and response.

The first year design experience should be a place where an initial design alphabet is explored by the student so that pages for future design sentences, paragraphs and statements may evolve over the years within the profession of design.