Teach Creatively, Learn Creativity: The Non-Assessed Field Trip

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Introduction

The story is a familiar one. A student starts an architecture course because of their creative interests only to find that their passions are overshadowed by the distraction of attaining a good grade. One can empathize with any student who succumbs to the Death Star-like gravitational pull of measured achievement; quantifying ability by means of attributing letters and percentages is axiomatically ingrained in almost all teaching systems and affects schools throughout the world.

Giving recognition to those who have worked hard is valuable and important. Likewise, endeavouring to raise standards in education is beyond doubt a worthy pursuit. However, extrinsic constraints restrain creativity within education by definition. The sour taste often associated with measuring aptitude is no more unsavoury than in the mouths of the creative artists. The challenge for teachers of the creative arts, therefore, is how to embrace a pedagogy that promotes creative thinking and design whilst developing a culture that recognises the merits of evaluation rather than measurement.

The School of Architecture at the University of Huddersfield responds to this challenge by programming a field trip into the curriculum early in the first academic year, which does not require students to produce assessable coursework. The purpose of the field trip is to heighten the student's creative aptitude and to enable peer bonding across the year. In recent years students have visited the Netherlands. The field trip is an experiential learning opportunity that embraces creative critical thinking. Looking, pointing and discussing why some buildings appear aesthetically pleasing or why other buildings do not fall over is a highly beneficial educational tool. Enabling or even prising out these discussions in a relaxed unfettered group environment releases passion for architecture.

This paper draws on recent non-assessed field trips and describes how the trip can be used as a method of educating students of architecture in a manner that heightens creativity and liberates students from the compulsion to please those who grade their work.

Defining creativity

For many, it is easier to recognise creativity than it is to define what creativity is. Moreover, the very act of defining creativity is inherently problematic, if not paradoxical. The unexpected novel enjoyment associated with creativity appears to be lost when the construct is distilled down to a precise outcome. The process is rather like the lose of romance when 'love' is described in terms of hormones, androgens and serotonergic signalling. Nevertheless, the author has chosen to face the predictable scorn for the purposes of research and offers some clarity to the amorphous notion of creativity whilst attempting to maintain an appreciation of its value.

In J. P. Guildford's inaugural address to the American Psychological Association in 1950 he questioned the apparent disconnection between education and creative productiveness.[1] Guildford stated that 'a creative act is an instance of learning'.[2] Furthermore, Guilford proposed that 'a comprehensive learning theory must take into account both insight and creative activity'.[3] However, perhaps Guildford's most lasting contribution to the quest to define creativity was his amalgamation of the construct with divergent thinking (the process of producing multiple answers or responses to a single problem) and convergent thinking (the process of employing acumen, logic and accuracy in answer or response to a problem). In a recent article for the Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) Goodwin and Miller note that divergent and convergent thinking are now often presented as synonymous with creativity.[4] The idea that creativity is a dual process comprising forms of novelty

and analysis is also championed by Sir Ken Robinson, who in 1998, led the British Government's advisory committee on creative and cultural education. Robinson argues that creativity 'is a process, not a single event, and genuine creative processes involve critical thinking as well as imaginative insights and fresh ideas'.[5] Being creative involves inventing or initiating new ideas and solutions whilst simultaneously analysing the effectiveness of the solution to resolve a problem. The process tends to be a cyclical approach and works most productively when divergent and convergent forces are balanced against each other.

Valuing creativity

The need for a greater understanding and a more widespread practice of creativity stems from two significant concerns facing the world today; namely, what Robinson observes to be the current systematic educating of creativity *out* of children in schools,[6] and what D. Pink notes is the world's growing thirst amongst the global economy and marketplace for creative people with 'an ability to synthesize knowledge and develop inventive solutions to complex challenges'.[7] Goodwin & Miller note that 'only 30% of new jobs created in the United States between 1998 and 2004 were of the routine, algorithmic variety, whereas 70% involve complex, heuristic work in which employees interact with other employees and customers and make complex decisions requiring knowledge, judgement, experience, and instinct'.[8] Whereas being creative was once almost purely a concern for the arts, modern challenges to our economy and our impact on the world in terms of population growth and the distribution of wealth and welfare, has led to a far wider urgency for creative thinking.

Evaluating creativity

Assessing and evaluating creativity is arguably the most challenging aspect for teachers of architecture in higher education. The problem of assessing architectural education, specifically that part of architectural education which relates to creativity, is largely twofold: the first part of the problem is *defining* that which could be assessed; the second part of the problem is *evaluating* that which could be assessed. In an article for the HEA entitled 'Assessing Students' Creativity' Norman Jackson notes, 'while many teachers believe that it is possible to help students use their creative abilities to better effect, far fewer think it is possible to assess these capabilities reliably and even fewer are prepared to try and do it. Yet evaluation is critical to the very idea of creativity'.[9]

It is because creativity eludes a precise definition that so many architecture students produce design studio work in pursuit of a desirable grade rather than work that seeks to imbue unencumbered divergent and convergent thinking. For many students, the compulsion to have their achievements recognised by means of a grade and the necessary ambiguity of what any given design project should be like, leads to the practice risk avoidance, the very enemy of creativity itself. Jackson argues that 'paradoxically, … assessment can be a major inhibitor of creativity. Learning emerges from creative processes in unpredictable ways. In some respects it is antithetic to outcome based learning that is predicated on a teachers' notion of what will be valued at the end of the process.'[10] Jackson continues to note that extrinsic requirements tend to 'focus on results rather than the process of acquiring the results – where the creativity lies. It also does not permit failure (a distinct likelihood in high risk situations where students are attempting to do radical things for the first time). It encourages students to play safe, to achieve the outcome intended by the teacher rather than the outcome the student would like to achieve.'[11]

Metacognition

Determining what is a good or bad architectural design is often a judgement of worth based on personal values. The judgement takes into account the final product and the process by which the product has been derived. Jackson helpfully asserts that 'understanding a student's creativity depends to some extent on their ability to understand and explain it. Self awareness (metacognition) would seem to be a worthy and necessary partner to creativity'.[12] The link between assessing creativity and metacognition was first asserted by Guildford in 1975, 'the student [should] be taught about the nature of his own intellectual resources, so that he may gain more control over them'.[13] The task of establishing and understanding an architectural design pursuit in response to a brief engenders a creative consciousness. The ability to respond with one's own agenda and explain resolution(s) that demonstrate controlled creativity is a metacognitive approach. Critical to metacognition is the self motivation

and the ability for the student to choose their own task. Recognisable metacognitive outcomes include the ability to clearly describe the problem, justify the solution, account for the process that has led to a novel and effective final proposal, and reflect on both the product and process.

Teaching creatively

The first year of an architectural course is an important time to set the trajectory of student learning. During this year a primary focus for teachers of architecture is to help students to acquire an understanding of the 'blurred boundaries' that surround architecture and 'nebulous rules' that govern it. Jackson suggests that the highest calling for an teacher is to 'help students to develop the capacity to invent their own frameworks and processes for learning. … This type of creativity sits at the heart of an educational enterprise which is directed to engaging in complex learning.'[14] The process by which this critical thinking takes place tends to involve more unlearning and relearning than it does learning something new.

At the school of architecture in The University of Huddersfield Year 1 students are consciously *taught creatively* such that they *learn creativity*. Teaching sessions take on a variety of forms including lectures, workshops, research based projects and live projects; however, throughout the year the environment for learning is set to be conducive to creative and critical thinking. This environment works best when the following are practiced:

- Novelty is encouraged. Unusual, yet considered, ideas are supported and reinforced.
- Failure is regarded as a positive opportunity to recognise error and practice reflection.
- Students are given a mixture of long and short projects, often overlapping. The longer projects allow students to develop creative ideas. It is recognised that not all creativity occurs immediately or spontaneously.
- Students are encouraged to participate in group teaching, feedback and tutorial sessions. Tutorials are often held in small groups to encourage greater interaction and mutual respect.
- A weekly housekeeping meeting allows students to voice concerns, propose ideas and contribute towards decision making. On occasion the teaching pattern is paused for a social event or amended to include alternative teaching activities in response to student requests.
- Students are issued with non-assessed project work.

It is this last point relating to non-assessment that is of particular interest to this paper because it inherently creates a culture of learning that heightens unfettered creativity and liberates students from the lurid attraction to attain a good grade. Without the constraints of assessment, students are able to explore the key traits of creative architectural learning; namely, divergent and emergent thinking and design. Fundamentally, these projects are premised on the understanding that the creative responses that are developed within non-assessed projects aid in forming a culture of creativity that impacts assessed projects and wider attitudes towards learning.

The most effective and enjoyable learning exercise run by the architecture school in Huddersfield is one that is devoted to the benefits of non-assessment - the annual field trip.

Learning creativity - the non assessed field trip

For the last three years the Year 1 students have visited the Netherlands. The field trip is generally timed to be near the beginning of the academic year and doubles up as a bonding mechanism for the year group. The trip typically comprises 35-40 students and two or three members of staff.

The purpose of the field trip is to enable students to learn about architecture by experience, to enjoy architecture and be freed from the pressure and distraction of assessment. Whilst students are encouraged to sketch, paint, photograph and record their experiences, the trip is purposefully unrestricted. It's informality gives space for casual conversations on the merits of specific buildings. Observing and critically appraising built architecture and urban settings are invaluable and enjoyable learning mechanisms. How buildings are made? What keeps them from falling over? Why do buildings sometimes feel aesthetically pleasing or appropriate and others less so? How did that get Planning Permission? These and many other questions help to develop a healthy creative attitude towards discussing and designing architecture.

Fig. 1. Educatorium, Utrecht, OMA, R. Koolhaas, 1992-1997
Students discussing and photographing the building. Buildings visited that attract a lot of attention tended to result in long discussions over coffee. The Educatorium was one such example of a 'cappuccino grande' discussion.

The Netherlands

The flat Dutch landscape contains many of the most progressive buildings in Europe. It packs an architectural punch far in excess of its demographic size. Groenendijk and Vollaard note that 'the past few decades have brought a new zest and a restored self-respect to Dutch Architecture and planning… The combination of realism and the urge to experiment, the continued advance of modernism and the many opportunities for young architects to get their work built have met with international acclaim and emulation, particularly in the closing decade of the 20th century'.[15]

The influence of Rem Koolhaas has unquestionably been of significant importance. Since the start of his practice, Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA) in 1975, Koolhaas has designed a series of buildings that have shaken established convention. Many architects of note in their own right either started in or passed through Koolhaas' office. (At the time of writing, a student of Huddersfield University is currently working in the Rotterdam Office). However, the current architectural landscape cannot be solely attributed to Koolhaas; Groenendijk and Vollaard continue to describe that 'the new generation profited from the drastic and evidentially fertile changes in architectural education post 1968 and, in the period of economic upsurge following the recession at the onset of the 1980's, had the opportunity to get work built, supported in this by a government that was gradually shifting the quantitative policy of post-war reconstruction to a greater concern for quality, in housing and in the large-scale planning operations'.[16] The country also continues to experience radical change with the reclamation of large parts of its land mass from the sea by a system of dykes and large scale hydraulic engineering projects.

The combination of unique individuals, a social and political awareness of the future rather than the past, and the acquisition of large areas of land have given rise to a broad and rich collection of contemporary architecture. It is this rich architectural ground that has helped the field trips to be successful.

The field trip programme

The trip starts with a coach journey from The University of Huddersfield to Hull Ferry Terminal and an overnight crossing to Rotterdam. Over the following six days students travel to Dutch towns and cities including Hilversum, Utrecht, Delft, Amsterdam and Almere. After an initial day tour of Rotterdam the group retires to its base hostel in Amsterdam. Students are expected to congregate for breakfast and then leave for a daily tour at 9.30am (the promptness of departure depends upon the previous night's activities). Each day tour ends at around 5.00pm. Typically the group travels together to a specific building or an area by coach and then students and staff walk or cycle either individually, but more often, in small groups. Throughout the day conversations are held, observations are made and questions are asked. The trip ends with a return journey to Huddersfield and the obligatory search by customs officers for illegal substances.

Prior to departure students are issued with a pack containing a collection of maps showing the location of notable public architecture. Each building is denoted by an icon relating to key information including whether the building can be accessed internally and any associated costs to the visit. The information packs also cite the building architect and where possible, links to published information. The maps are constructed using Google Maps, allowing all the information to be digitally shared.[17] The following notated pictures outline a diary of events.

Fig. 2. Housing, Almere Buiten, Unknown architects, c. 1997.
Day 1. In the late 1990's an open competition was held in Almere to construct 600 houses. 15 architectural practices were chosen including Carel Weeber (the chairman of the Dutch equivalent of the RIBA and the initiator of the competitions), Mecanoo and Herman Hertzberger. The city now hosts buildings by SANAA, OMA, René van Zuuk, Will Alsop, MVRDV, David Chipperfield and UN Studio.

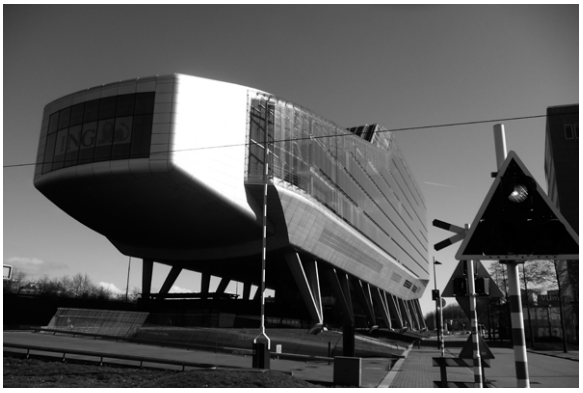

Fig. 4. ING Bank Head Office, Amsterdam, Meyer & Van Schooten, 1998-2002.
Day 3. The author recalls the first visit. A coach of 40 students arrived uninvited and started to photograph the building. A security guard walked over and asked who we were. 'Student architects' came the reply. Surprisingly, the whole year was invited inside and allowed to walk around unaccompanied. How implausible that would be in the UK?

Fig. 3. Raadhuis (Town Hall), Hilversum, W.M. Dudok, 1928-1931.
Day 2. The Raadhuis in Hilversum is widely recognised as Dudok's greatest building. Whilst it is not unanimously appreciated by Year 1 students, it is the one building that most staff enjoy revisiting.

Fig. 5. Woonzorgcomplex (sheltered housing), Amsterdam, MVRDV, 1994-1997
Day 4. A block of 100 units for the elderly. After an initial planning design it was realised that only 87 units would fit onto the site; MVRDV's solution was to insert the remaining units in 11m cantilevered blocks that appears to defy gravity.

Fig. 6. Borneo-Sporenburg, Amsterdam, West 8 (Masterplanners), 1994-1990.
Day 5. 2500 housing units cover two peninsulas that form the Eastern docks near the centre of Amsterdam. The three-story high houses are lined-up like books on a shelf with a density of 100 units per hectare. Each house was designed by an architect in accordance with each client's/tenant's requirements to attain variety within set parameters.

Fig. 7. Year 1 students and the pupils of a primary school in Zeewolde, 2011.
The author recalls that in 2011 the Kunstcentrum (arts centre) in Zeewolde was closed for music rehearsals when the group arrived. Next to the arts centre children were playing football in the school playground during their playtime. A few students who didn't know better decided to join in the match. The parents and teachers who were looking after the children did not seem to mind, so the rest of the year joined in. The University of Huddersfield won.

Conclusion

A precise definition of creativity in the context of architectural education is difficult to establish and arguably the wrong quest to embark upon. This paper has sought to demonstrate that to box creativity into prescriptive terms is itself harmful to the notion of creativity. Conversely, describing what creativity could look like (e.g. a dual process of investing or initiating new ideas or solutions and evaluating the effectiveness of the solution with regard to a problem) enables creative learning to become a more self-reflective, metacognative exercise.

This paper has also argued that a primary concern for a teacher of architecture should be to enable students to learn creativity and think creatively aside from the constraints associated with assessment. The non-assessed field trip has been championed as a useful teaching and learning mechanism. The field trip to an architecturally energetic place, coupled with the freedom to behave and think creatively by removing (in part) the notion of assessment, is one of the most rewarding architectural educational experiences.

Notes

[1] Guildford, J.P. , Creativity, *American Psychologist*, Vol. 5, 1950.
[2] Guildford, ibid, p.446.
[3] Guildford, ibid.
[4] Goodwin, Bryan & Miller, Kirsten, Research Says / Creativity Requires a Mix of Skills, *Creativity Now!,* Vol. 70, No. 5, 2013
[5] Robinson, Ken, Why Creativity?, A Conversation with Sir Ken Robinson, Teaching for the 21st Century, Vol. 67, No. 1, 2009.
[6] Ibid
[7] Pink, D., *A Whole New Mind: Why Right-Brainers Will Rule the Future*. New York: Penguin, 2005.
[8] Goodwin, Bryan & Miller, Kirsten, op cit.
[9] Jackson, Norman, *Assessing Student's Creativity: Synthesis of High Education Teacher Views*, The Higher Education Academy, 2005.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Guildford, J.P., Varieties of Creative Giftedness, Their Measurements and Applications, *Gifted Child Quarterly*, Vol. 19, 1975.
[14] Jackson, op cit.
[15] Groenendijk, Paul & Vollaard Piet, *Architectural Guide to the Netherland (1980-Present),* Uitgeverij 010 Publishers, 2009. p. 8.
[16] Groenendijk & Vollaard, ibid.
[17] Griffin, Alexander, Google Maps. The Netherlands. https://maps.google.co.uk/maps/ms?msid=205395738258105038108.00049e217c89391b93239&msa=0