ABSTRACT:
Why Do You Always Make Us Think? Maintaining a Journal in the Beginning Design Studio

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THE GOOD NEWS:

On the surface, we consider freshman design studio at Louisiana Tech University not much more than an extension of kindergarten: sitting in a big room making something or playing outside in the sunshine. Constructing everything from toothpick vessels to shirts made of paper to full-scale spaces out of concrete block, the studio day is a fun, active 3-hour class, full of experimentation upon primarily material-based assignments. Students even claim they enjoy it. What's more, if the students come to class and do the project, they will receive full credit: projects aren't evaluated. Merely participate and students get 100% of project points.

THE BAD NEWS:

What *is* evaluated (and accounts for 40% of the course grade) is a journal, which each student keeps of his/her work. The Journal is the source of preparation for the upcoming class period and, most importantly, the source of reflection upon the work completed by the end of a studio class. Its purpose is to prepare, research, document process, analyze materials, "eulogize" the resultant artifact, and reflect on the project's value to the world outside of the classroom. It is rigorous, somewhat prescriptive, very demanding. It challenges students to not take their actions or the world around them without asking the questions: of what, how, or why. AND, it must be beautiful.
It's safe to say that our students HATE the journal.

A task that often seems worse than forcing a child to eat their brussels sprouts before leaving the dinner table, the "soft, yet firm" diligence required to maintain a quality studio journal continues to challenge both our beginning design faculty and students. For the last seven years, we have continually sought to develop this tool of thoughtful reflection and to dodge the pitfalls of our unsuspecting freshmen. This presentation seeks to discuss issues of our journals: its grand purpose, its organization, its content, its evaluation, its resultant product and its criticism by our students. This paper contends that a method of critical thinking must begin immediately in the beginning design studios to instill the notion that (architectural) design must be a purposeful and thoughtful means of communication. This paper also hopes to open a discussion with other programs by asking the question of how instructors implement the responsibilities of critical preparation and introspection into the minds of beginning design students . . . believe me, we are still struggling with this one.

WHY DO YOU ALWAYS MAKE US THINK?

Maintaining a Journal in the Beginning Design Studio

Do we have to do a journal in the second year studios, too?

Hands down, this is the most asked question of our freshman architecture and interior design students as complete their first three-studio sequence in the spring of their first year of our program. They dread "the journal." Those two words ("the" and "journal") when placed together in the hallowed halls of the Wyly Tower of Learning, foretell of gloom and doom. Other students are more blunt in their appraisal: "Studio would be a cool class if you just get rid of that #@$%ing journal." They *hate* the journal. It seems that "the journal" has become a Louisiana Tech rite of passage, some bizarre eight-month ritual akin to the cruelest forms of tribal culture ever documented that would warrant a visit of a National Geographic photographer (or at least Geraldo Rivera). Its ability to exhaust and demoralize students is more dangerous, more horrifying than any college fraternity's alleged hazing procedures.

Do you know why it is so cruel?

We make them sit down, think and write about their work for more than fifteen minutes. There are a million things that they would rather do, and it shows.

Little do our students know that what's even *more* cruel, is the teacher who, now, has the torture of having to evaluate fifteen of these journals over a weekend to return for a grade on Monday morning. I *despise* the journals. In fact, I have decided to write this paper rather than leaf through these student writings that sit menacingly on a shelf within arms-reach of my computer. Enduring another page of contrived drivel with misspelled words and incoherent thoughts is almost more than a single human can endure.

So if we have reached a consensus of complete loathing of the journal, why do we do this to ourselves?

Throughout most of our studio curriculum, from freshman year to graduation, there is a mention somewhere deep in the first-day-of-class syllabus about the importance of maintaining a journal during the academic quarter. Its mention was included a couple upper level studios I have taught in my first year at the University. Serving as the repository for sketches, thoughtful reflection, photocopies of relevant images and texts, it is serves as the index of a design project's evolution. From conceptual notions to iterations of architectural ideas to fabrication and assembly of the built object, the journal provides that physical, tangible document of the design process. It serves as a tool for a student to compose and draw thoughts in a book. It is the chronicle of the project's developmental journey.
. . . well, at least that's what I wrote in the syllabus.

While there are some notable exceptions, these journals are simply an accumulated trash pile of hastily thrown together sheets of paper to "keep Karl happy." Despite efforts of discussing with my students that a journal isn't a way form of punishment, but actually could be a tool to help them in thinking about and in developing their projects, they didn't buy it. They did not find the diligence of keeping such a document as a worthwhile endeavor. When I asked why this was the case, the arguments were that the journal slows down their creative energy, that the journal takes too much time, and that it requires more work than the task at hand (e.g. design a museum). I even had an upper level student tell me that he doesn't like to research architectural precedents because it stifles his creativity. When I had the opportunity to join the faculty who teach the foundation level studios, I was ready. We had to start this effort of fostering the notion of critical observation and reflection early, or it may never happen. That said, I am still learning that this is a frustrating and often thankless task in the beginning design studios and our forays in fostering a group of thoughtful makers will be the topic of this discussion.

THE TROUBLED CULT OF *COOL WORK*

As an aside and in having the drudgery of having read hundreds of journal entries, I am even more convinced this the obvious: that our students are controlled by the power of our visual, information-mad world. As vicarious participants in our consumer culture, this visual world is not only provocative and sexy, but also very easy. While I don't want to get sidetracked in such a discussion, mass-media dominates our students, and their thoughts, like television, music and video games, can be consumed quickly and in large amounts. It's an all-you-can eat buffet, and it's right in front of you. You don't even have to get out of your chair. That's pretty cool, but it gets people very lazy.

As a second, somewhat more serious aside, I also think that because we (as design teachers) are a gang of aesthetes by our very nature, we are easily seduced by the provocative drawing or object as well. Inevitably, we enjoy working with those students who have a better visual sense and who complete our project assignments with work that looks more refined and polished than other students. It makes us feel good seeing slick work coming out of our design studios because, well, it makes us think that we are good teachers. With that slick work in hand, we take pictures of it, add it to our portfolio, we present it at conferences with other genius teachers. I do it myself, but it's getting boring because I have realized how shallow my self evaluation of my teaching can become if I am judged by the work of a few students who may be succeeding in spite of me.

I'm still somewhat new at this teaching game, but I am learning there will always be a student or two in a given studio who will create something that has a certain surface visual attraction. If you have a class of 15 students, there will always be two or three that make something slick or at least well crafted enough to show your colleagues. Our group of foundation design teachers has noted that with a group of freshman, each with three hours of time, a box of toothpicks and a bottle of glue, we can get a group of nice vessels.

The problem comes when we ask the students with that prized vessel about what they did and why they did it. It's becoming clear that we develop a pretty decent group of craftspeople, but if they really don't know what they are really doing or why they are doing it, well, that's a problem. Usually, the answers to such question take on a caveman-like grunt and shoulder shrug intimating the notion of both "I don't know" and "you mean there is supposed to be a meaning in what I produce in this class . . . it's just a pot made of toothpicks?"

ENTER THE JOURNAL

Always striving for the ideal, we asked our students to look at the journals and sketchbooks of Michelangelo, Steven Holl, Santiago Calatrava, and a few others. I believe the hope was

that in presenting a few pages of their notes and sketches, we could show students that, in fact, even the geniuses need a place to write and draw ideas. The fault of my own idealism, I imagined that a group of seventeen year olds could spend hours watching a babbling brook, notice the swirls of water curl upstream at its edges, draw it, muse about it, and design the stairs of the Laurentian Library. Getting a student to sit for fifteen minutes to look at *anything* is a task in itself.

HOW OUR FIRST YEAR STUDIOS WORK

As teachers, perhaps the most significant move on our part was deciding that student projects in the first year of the foundation design program would not be evaluated. This position was to respond to the fact that we did not want to reward a student so early in the curriculum just because he or she could produce a more visually pleasing toothpick vessel than another. Our policy is quite simple: if you come to class, stay for the entire time and work on the daily activity, you will get full credit. Sixty percent of the students' grade is simply making it to class and working.

On that first day of class, we read verbatim from the syllabus:

> Students are required to submit an in-depth explorative and revelatory journal three times during the quarter, once for each main activity. There are specific content and format requirements that you must follow. The journals comprise 40% pf your final grade, and will be evaluated for both content and graphics.
>
> Why do we do a journal? (*Students begin to lose interest*)
>
> Observation, exploration and revelation:
>
> The journal should not be a "chore." It is a time for you to think, ponder, and explore the project in depth. A time for you to make connection between the studio projects and the outside world, which includes the world of architecture. Use the opportunity to dig deep into "why?", "what if?", "I wonder . . . ", etc.
>
> Organization and communication: (*students are now sleeping*)
>
> Part of being successful, in college and in any profession, is the ability to gather and compile materials, edit, organize, and clearly communicate with others. This is an opportunity to build those skills. For designers, who operate in a visual medium, this must be done graphically as well as verbally.
>
> . . . Your journal is a creative, composed document-done with intent and purpose.
>
> . . . Ultimately, a successful journal is an instrument of exploration, opinion, query, doodling, revelation, history, the mysteries of design, the quest for enlightenment.

When this is explained to the students on the first day of class they fixate on the part about just coming to class and having fun. That *journal-thing* is of little importance to them . . . yet.

There have been several evolutionary changes in these journals over the past several years. Every year and sometimes every quarter, amendments and changes result in reworking the description of the journal. While the content requirements and format of the journal have evolved over the past several years, there have been three threads that have been used since the beginning:

> the documentation of the students' process of making;
> the comparison of the students' studio work with something in the "real" world; and
> the formatting of journal to create a document that communicates effectively using image and text.

DOCUMENT (FROM MATERIAL THROUGH PROCESS TO PRODUCT)

One of the required tools for the first year design studios is a camera. Students are required to photograph key stages in the evolution of the project. Photographs are more objective than drawings and, for our sake, quicker. The students are to document the transition from raw material to final product through a series of process photographs. Students are well aware that the holy trinity of the journal is images and descriptions of *material* (what is it made of), *process* (how is it made) and *product* (what is it/why is it).

In the material discussion of the project the students are to think about the materials that they are provided (box of toothpicks, glue). Students are asked to describe the physical qualities of the raw material provided. They are asked how the materials are traditionally used. They are asked about unique characteristics of the materials and how these unique characteristics could be used in the making of the project. How do the quality and characteristics of the materials at hand influence the possibilities?

In the process discussion, a collection of images supplement a written description of the objective tasks and the subjective observations required from moving from pile of raw material (toothpicks and glue) to assembled product (vessel) through as series of steps (drawing a section, creating a pattern, repeating the pattern, stacking). Initially, likened to a highly rarified step-by-step process like that in a cookbook, (get your 3 eggs, cup of flour, beat the eggs, etc.), the documenting of process has been discussing how the action words (cutting, pattern making,

stacking) influences the resultant product. In addition to describing the evolving project through these action words, a comparison of the activity (stacking toothpicks), is compared to an activities that can be found in the "real world" (building a log cabin, painting like Jackson Pollack).

In the product discussion, the student has an opportunity to "eulogize" the resultant object. Because the journal is turned in a few days after the completion of the project, there is some critical distance between the maker and the object to allow for some retrospection. Students are asked to describe the product, to critique it in terms of appearance, function, and craft. Students are also to compare the product to other products similar to it. Research in individuals or companies that produce similar artifacts would be discussed. Students could ruminate what could be done using the product as a starting point.

COMPARE TO THE "REAL" WORLD

How does a toothpick vessel, a wire prosthetic hand or a paper shirt connect to the world outside of our studio space? This requires thinking "outside of the box." Perhaps the primary reason for the journal is to encourage students to critically observe the world around them. We hope within the course of the quarter (and in the rest of their lives) that our students begin to realize the interconnectedness of things. This ability to observe things and events critically is a necessary characteristic of any designer and serves as a foil to the complacent consumer of information. Students are required in the journal to keep their minds open and their scrutiny of the things around them acute. Using their studio project as the point of departure, students are challenged to try and find a way to link their work to the world around them, be it via architecture, the landscape, their last meal, whatever.

In the writing of the journal, we encourage our students to brainstorm (of course!).

Ruminations of the studio projects' materials, processes and products beg to find links to the real world. We supplement their studio experience with small research activities (works by artists and architects) as well as field trips to various factories and manufacturing plants in the region.

FORMAT OF THE JOURNAL

The journal requires both written content and image/visual content. Each individual page of the journal is divided roughly into half text and half image. On each page, the words and images work together to effectively communicate the ideas. Students are evaluated not only on the quality of the content, but also in their ability to manner the two types of content into a clear whole. Text is to be typewritten and images are to "fit" within the text. Students are reminded that magazines, billboards, and websites abound to serve as examples of composing images and text. Using their own observation of the visual world as their guide, they are required to make judgments regarding the effectiveness of the pages as graphic communication.

There are five pages that constitute the journal for each project:

Page One: The Project Handout
Page Two: Material Discussion
Page Three: Process Discussion
Page Four: Product Discussion
Page Five: Speculative Ruminations/Insight/Real World applications

For extra credit, a student may also add a sixth page, which challenges the student to create a new project handout. The new project should relate to and grow from application and insight gained from the journal. It is worth noting that very few students produce a sixth page.

THE BIG PICTURE

All of the work on studio projects occurs during class time. We have a big room within which to work, and our students are encouraged to keep the potential mess of a project within classroom. We rely on the bustling of activity during the three-hour time slot as a way to bounce around ideas, to discuss possibilities, and to assist in any problems along the way.

Work on the journal, however, is a solitary activity. Discussion about the journal, if needed, is done after class with the inquiring individual student. Students are asked to take their project, to sit it next to them at the computer lab or their dorm room, to look at it, and to write about it. While we, as teachers can frame questions and format the type of work required in the journal, it must begin with the student pausing for a moment and observing what they did.

We hope that these moments of pause and quiet reflection in the beginning stages of the design education, provides a critical basis upon future studios and future work. We hope to teach and inspire thoughtful making and design. And although I still dread the work ahead in grading these journals, I am heartened by that hope.