

A Beginner's Mind

PROCEEDINGS

**21st National Conference
on the Beginning Design Student**

Stephen Temple, editor

**Conference held at the
College of Architecture
The University of Texas at San Antonio
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Situating Beginnings
Questioning Representation
Alternative Educations
Abstractions and Conceptions
Developing Beginnings
Pedagogical Constructions
Primary Contexts
Informing Beginnings
Educational Pedagogies
Analog / Digital Beginnings
Curriculum and Continuity
Interdisciplinary Curricula
Beginnings
Design / Build
Cultural Pluralities
Contentions
Revisions
Projections

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On Continuity

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“Design is not an object of study; design is a mode of inquiry and exploration.”¹

0. Introduction

A few years ago at a conference on the beginning design student, my colleagues and I presented the work from our first-year, first-semester design studio. The course content had been developing for about three years, and had reached a state of maturity that merited evaluation and discussion. Since then, our program’s five-year curriculum has undergone strict scrutiny, first by our faculty in preparation for a NAAB accreditation visit, and then by the NAAB team itself. As first-year coordinator, I became interested in the evolution of the first-year architecture curriculum through self-assessment and in the role of continuity in architectural education.

Continuity means not re-inventing the wheel. It also means holding some things steady while others evolve. By varying what is held steady across time, every aspect can have an opportunity to evolve at some point. All our courses have syllabus templates that define the essential objectives and goals of each class. These templates evolve slowly, but they do evolve, as the faculty examine strengths and weaknesses in the curriculum. Meanwhile, each time a course is offered, instructors re-interpret how to meet the objectives and goals.

While in second and third year the coordinators change each semester, the first-year coordinator remains constant from fall to spring. In this position I have been able to get a longer view of how our foundation sequence works, and its role within the overall education of our architecture students.

1. Curricular continuity

We have adopted the principle of curricular continuity, within a year/level and across the five years, in response to program self-assessment and faculty willingness to strive for a cohesive and coherent architectural education at our institution. We conceive the first-year architecture sequence as a design-focused “First Year Experience,” introducing not only principles, processes, and skills of representation, but also ways of research and analysis, critical thinking as a design tool, investigation as a way of stimulating interests beyond the studio, and the establishment of architecture’s role in history and culture. This foundation provides multiple avenues for later faculty to continue developing students’ skills, knowledge and practice, and for students to continue their investigation and education as their interests and strengths develop.

Studio 1A, *Principles and Processes, Bodies and Objects*, comprises a set of progressive projects. Students work at full scale as they develop both an understanding of the principles of architectural design and a set of processes for launching a design inquiry. Projects become increasingly more difficult as students are asked to consider larger and more complex relationships between the body and its environment. Studio 1B, *Natural Tendencies*, continues the investigation of relationships while working at the scale of inhabitation, definition and enclosure of space. Studio 1B comprises five iterations of essentially one project: defining and creating a space of less than 300 sq.ft. for a specific human tendency (program) on a given abstracted place condition (site) and working with one of the five elements of Chinese cosmology (material and structure).

The foundation of architectural education is conceived across these two semesters. Studio 1A involves a certain amount of defamiliarization, as we ask students to reconsider what they think they know about architecture. The field and the inquiry turn out to be broader than they may have believed. Principles and processes from 1A are referred to directly in 1B, and students are reminded of work they did in the first semester as they struggle to conquer the second. In 1B, the repetition of the inquiry, with only a few parameters changing, encourages the development of depth and the habit of practice.

Concurrent with 1A in the fall, Design Communication 1 focuses on the tools of design, the conventions of architectural representation, and the communicative value of hand-drawn graphic expression. The studio drawing assignments rely directly on what is covered in Design Communication, which helps students understand the relationship between drawing and thinking and helps us postpone the development of the “studio is the only things that matters” attitude. Concurrent with 1B in the spring, Design Communication 2 focuses on the digital tools of drawing and design. Here the studio requires multiple media in presentation panels, to incorporate the digital techniques from Design Com 2 and to maintain the ability to draw quickly by hand in plan and section.

Curricular continuity appears in sequential studios as each builds upon elements of what came before. In 1A and 1B, students are required to produce an intentional text for each project, and this text is revised and used for presentation at the project review. Intentional texts appear again in 2A, and lessons about craft from 1A are also an important part of this studio. 2B takes up the issue of site conditions first explored in 1B, but moves from abstract place to actual contexts in the city. By third year the idea of writing an intentional text for a project statement is habitual, and while students are still grappling with what constitutes a “concept,” they are well aware of the need to cite influences, seek inspiration from precedents, and develop a clear verbal metaphor for their design ideas.

2. Pedagogical continuity

We have developed a strong pedagogical continuity in methods and models. The program seeks to integrate the strengths of “teaching as one has been taught” without promoting a singular style. Coordinating first year begins with the creation of a team of faculty from more than one educational and professional background, who are willing and eager to incorporate the best of their non-design educational experiences with their “lessons from studio” as we craft and re-craft projects and assignments to meet curricular objectives.

Several models of student/teacher interaction are established in the first semester, reinforced and reinterpreted in the second, and lay the foundation for the next two years of the program’s core curriculum. In 1A, students work with their section instructor for the whole semester, but each project review mixes students from all four sections. Instructors then have a greater understanding of work across the sections, and students understand that different instructors bring different points of view to the discourse. In 1B, instructors rotate within the four sections after each project. Students’ first and fifth projects are with their original section leader, but they complete the middle three projects each with a different instructor. Instructors get to work with all the students, and here, especially, the exposure of students to different pedagogies and different focuses enriches the educational experience.

We also establish pedagogical continuity and stronger program memory through progressive studio teaching assignments, having one instructor from each studio move forward with the students to the next in sequence. This means that at least one instructor from 1A also teaches in 1B, at least one from 1B will teach the following fall in 2A, someone from 2A also teaches in 2B, and so on through the core sequence. The continuing instructor brings his/her immediate experience of the group of students, the set of projects they undertook, the skills and knowledge they acquired, and the weaknesses of the class. This information helps the

coordinator develop an appropriate set of projects, and allows the sections to be constituted so that none is unbalanced with respect to strong and weak students. The familiar instructor also gives students an anchor, or a lifeline, as they attempt to make sense of a new set of issues and new perspectives.

Within a semester, strong coordination across sections is a cornerstone of continuity. Coordination requires diplomacy: making certain all instructors are on the same page, but not encroaching on their academic freedom. Coordination in first year is especially critical with respect to grading issues. We fight grade inflation, but it is difficult to contain one's enthusiasm as an instructor when students make progress in leaps and bounds. The first-year coordinator sets the standards for grading, usually by consensus. This is made easier through the practice of having all instructors take part in reviews of students from across the sections. For the first two projects, we sit down together after reviews and quickly debrief each other, identifying the strongest and weakest presentations. After we have developed a common language of evaluation, we grade the next two projects independently, but share our grade range with each other. This assures that grades are fairly assigned throughout the class, and it also gives each of us the confidence to address a student's grading issue should one arise.

The several types of team instruction we use in first year might raise some questions about academic freedom. However, because first year teaching assignments are seen a priori as construction of a team, and because each semester the team develops the particulars of the syllabus, each member of the instructional team has already bought into an effort much larger than her/himself. Individual class sessions are run as each instructor sees fit; one of our 1A instructors likes to take his section outside under a tree on gorgeous days. Review schedules are fixed, and we have all-studio meetings for announcements as needed, but each instructor develops an individual rhythm and repertoire. The repertoire might include small group critiques, desk crits, quick in-class exercises, peer reviews, and so on. Repertoires are not proprietary, and we frequently share with each other what has worked well (and what has not).

One final aspect of pedagogical continuity is the role the first-year coordinator plays as academic advisor. At Woodbury, each student's academic advisor is a faculty member from the student's major. The first-year coordinator advises a majority of first-year architecture students, and as advisor can check in on how a student is doing in non-studio classes. It's one thing to say in the classroom "You must manage your time and not neglect your other classes," but it rings hollow with the students when studio assignments are time and energy (and money) consuming, and the instructors seem to care only about studio. Because our community is small enough that we know all our students by name, it is essential to establish a relationship with the whole class, through its individual members, and promote the pursuit of *education*, not just grades, and especially not just studio grades. The incorporation of important reading and writing assignments into studio projects is not an abstract exercise in pedagogical experimentation, but a response to a deeper understanding of how our students are doing in their general education classes, what their strengths and weaknesses are, and how we can instill in them the idea of architect as educated person.

3. Continuity and community

The beneficiaries of intentional curricular and pedagogical continuity are the students, the instructors and the department community as a whole. Our objective for students is to give them a coherent educational experience. As the post-modern business model infiltrates the understanding of our social and cultural systems, applied higher education theory, too, has introduced notions such as outcomes-driven assessment, quantifiable objectives, and the identification of discrete learning events. Continuity as a principle opens a space of ideas in which we can step back from product-driven goals, examine our own best experiences, and consider how what we do contributes to the development of our students' experience. Such focused self-

awareness may be a by-product of post-modernism, and this paper itself arises from the “need” to analyze the “intension” and “extension” of continuity, but I won’t slip any further into the theoretical ether.

Among the benefits of continuity that accrue to instructors, I have found that it offers the ability to look across instances of teaching the same course and to follow students as they progress in the program. At Woodbury, the processes of contract renewal and promotion for full-time faculty require self-examination. For all faculty, the arrival of student evaluations in the mail is a moment of self-critique. Not just “Did they like me?” and “Did they say good things?” but also we ask ourselves how effective we were *this* time, what we are sending these students forward with. With intentional continuity we have something to compare our performance with, and we can formulate approaches to strengthening course content, its delivery, and the art of pedagogy.

One of the more challenging aspects of coordinating our first-year curriculum is establishing and maintaining the interdependence and continuity of design studio and design communication across the two semesters. This is especially true as our department assesses new skills, tools and techniques related to computer-assisted representation and production, and how they will move into our curriculum. In a curriculum that already seems to want to burst at the seams of its ten semesters, how and where do we incorporate new techniques and technologies? Design Communication 2 has responded to digital advances by focusing on equipping the student with tools for design development, rather than on straight representational output. Students are introduced sequentially to Photoshop, Autocad and 3-D Studio (or a similar 3-D program), and then encouraged to move freely among them. Studio 1B is in turn evolving to reinforce the multiple tool method, and intentionally to assign exercises with the combined use of digital and non-digital representations.

4. Cycles

By holding certain aspects of the first-year program steady while others evolve, and then “turning the dial” and holding different aspects steady for the next round of evolution, we find that the student community feels a certain vested interest in what the “new crop” of students will be doing, and what will be changing. Returning students begin to feel invested in architectural education outside of their own experience, and they serve willingly as mentors to the new first-years. Dr. Ellen J. Langer, a Harvard psychologist whose work explores mindfulness in health, business and education, writes of the seven myths that undermine learning and teaching.² She advocates teaching a healthy uncertainty to promote the acknowledgement of possibility. This includes the principle of variability to counter the myth of “canonical basics,” and is manifested in Studios 1A and 1B as one of the most important first lessons of studio, that there is no one right answer, no singular way of working that guarantees an A. Returning students therefore have all sorts of advice they are eager to give, and happily most of that advice comes in the form of *possible* ways of working or developing an idea, rather than “you have to do it this way to get a B+”. Returning students have an insight into the *endeavor*, not just into certain instructors’ preferences, and are surprisingly good at informal critiques with first-year students for design development.

Incremental evolution does promote a sense of tradition among students, and there was much disappointment among the higher years when this fall we changed the final project of the first year first semester. They saw it as a rite of passage – and of course, we did, too. But we saw “final project” as the means of passage, while they saw the particulars of the project as the rite. Continuity required a sufficiently difficult project that would challenge the students, but evolution required a rethinking of how the final 1A project tied into the 1B studio. The new final project passed its test run, and will be subject to the pulling and tweaking of next fall’s instructor team, but it does seem to fit the need for a threshold project into the next level of investigation.

In order not to leave a sense that Woodbury has its curriculum so neatly integrated and sequenced that every aspect of it is intentional, I will admit that there are both circumstantial elements of continuity and failures of continuity. Some things continue because of inertia, the tendency of bodies (or ideas) in motion to stay in motion, and those at rest to stay at rest. The 1A curriculum is provocative in its embrace of projects executed at full scale. But these projects need to be focused more strongly, especially at the beginning, on seeking and establishing systems of order. That is, the experimentation and defamiliarization could be geared toward designing within simple descriptive geometries as a base, and moving on to more complex geometries in later projects. This could have a two-fold effect: it would enable students to apply the lessons of architectural drawing conventions from Design Communication 1 in their studio drawings, and it could provide a literal framework onto which more complex systems could be mapped. Not re-inventing the wheel, or returning to pre-pneumatic tires, but truing up the spokes.

On the other hand, Studio 1B continually expands and contracts in the complexity of relationships repeated in each project. Some of this is the circumstance of losing instructional team members who were invested in some particular aspect of the course. Some of it is seeing a student cohort develop a mass response we had neither intended nor anticipated. The overall trajectory of 1B seems to be to simplify the number of relationships, and strengthen those that remain. Given the cyclic nature of course development, I suspect we will see new buds of growth in complexity soon. And we will re-evaluate the principles and lessons, and true up accordingly.

What is a failure in continuity? Since we have sought to establish connections between courses at a level and across levels, a sea change in a course can throw off carefully drawn intersections or links. Key faculty who are gone from their usual spot can cause such disruptions in continuity. These can be re-established or re-connected with faculty care. A more important failure is when course sequencing is subverted, a continuing difficulty when we admit transfer students or when a student falls out of sequence by failing a course. We have developed a few approaches to special types of transfers, such as those who enter with a single studio already under their belt, but in fact each transfer student is a unique case. Luckily we are still small enough to do a departmental evaluation for each student, and combine this with the academic advising I described above. But there are times when there is no neat fit, and the continuity of curriculum we have sought so carefully to create is experienced more as a multi-course dinner in which all the plates are brought at once, or the dessert precedes the antipasto.

A full assessment of continuity means looking ahead and looking back. Are the principles and academic practices established in first year still evident by the time of the capstone degree project in the fifth? So many lessons, so many skills, so many experiences have intervened that it is difficult to point to any one thing and say "Yes, that definitely comes out of first year." But here is what I see when I look at our degree project students: they have not totally abandoned trace paper for the computer. They move easily and confidently from one instructor's critique to another, and in fact seek out multiple voices. They can look for and draw relationships among entities and ideas that at first blush look like apples and oranges (aha! fruits!). They understand that the process and the practice is the design – the mode of inquiry and exploration – and the products are representations of the design. They know that representations come in several media, including graphic, verbal and three-dimensional, digital and analog, and they know they need multiple tools both to conduct the exploration and to communicate their ideas. These are all principles of design inquiry established and practiced in the first-year architecture studio.

Since I have the good fortune and honor to work with degree project students in the spring as a project advisor, I also have the opportunity to consider what lessons from the fifth year I can re-interpret for the first. One lesson is the paradigm – in fifth year students are asked to investigate a set of practices, or a way of working, or a system of concepts or values, that shapes or defines a reality for its participants. An example would be analyzing a traditional dance for its event sequence, its necessary performers, its context, its history, and its cultural content for its

audience. Fifth-year students work from their understanding of the paradigm toward an approach to defining and/or working with the issue they have identified as the root concept of their degree project. This requires not only in-depth research but a sustained effort to interpret and re-interpret what they have found in relationship to what they exploring. I imagine that we might introduce the paradigm approach at the first-year level by carefully and intentionally exposing students to paradigms both within and outside architecture that have had effect beyond the original field or discipline. A primary lesson could be the degree of internal consistency of systems, and how open systems promote change.

The second potential lesson from fifth year is that each student must develop a set of criteria by which his or her success/progress can be evaluated. This could be seen as an extending of Langer's principle of variability; each set of criteria develops from a particular viewpoint with a specific and well-defined approach to a design-based learning situation. In translating this requirement to first-year studios, we might ask students to begin to establish the habit of identifying their goals in each project. While at the beginning I suspect there will be mindless answers such as "I want to get an A," "I want to do something different," we can encourage greater aims, goals based on design principles and on critical inquiry.

Continuity works only as a partner of change. If our graduates can go out in the world, seek opportunities to apply their tools for critical thinking and design practice, and effect positive change, then we will have met our own criteria for success.

Notes

1. Nelson, Wayne A. "Problem Solving through Design," in *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, v. 95 "Problem-Based Learning in the Information Age," eds. David S. Knowlton and David C. Sharp. Wiley Periodicals (2003).
2. Langer, Ellen J. *The Power of Mindful Learning*. Perseus Books (1997).