



QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY BELFAST

Enhancing
Assessment
Practices

Active and Interactive Learning at Stage 1 - 'Writing Architecture Project'

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Description | What was done?

Context

Since 2011, Architecture students have been required to present all written work, from all modules, in a Theory and Writing Portfolio. Students will therefore graduate with both a portfolio of design work as well as proof of their ability to write in a variety of formats: reports, graphic essays, group reflections, essay outlines and extended essays. In the current period of economic downturn, it is important for students to be able to evidence the valuable and transferable writing skills they have developed.

This has posed significant challenges, on account of the 20th century concentration on drawing and the making of buildings as the 'real' language of architecture which relegated the role of writing in both education and professional architecture. The use of writing plays an important role in the development of critical thinking skills and architects need to 'translate' their professional practice and its discipline-specific jargon into language that the layman can understand.

Many UK educated students who enter the degree course may not have written a structured essay since they were 15 years old. None of the top 17 Schools of Architecture in the UK require English A level for admission. Recognition of this lack of writing skills led to the development of the 'Writing Architecture Project' and it has evolved since its inception in 2008: the changes included many that were made to the undergraduate programme in the Theory modules. Each of these is predominantly assessed through an essay which starts at 2,000 words in Stage 1 and progresses to 3,000 words by Stage 3: the Stage 1 essay is worth the majority of the overall marks students receive (60%); the essay outline is worth 30% and the writing portfolio counts for 10%.

Module: the project is part of the History and Theory of Architecture module, taught in semester 1

Preferred room type: Studio space, lecture theatre

Timetabling of session: 12 sessions are timetabled.

Activity

What do you do? (content, assessment etc.)

Students produce a mid-term essay outline, in which they are expected to provide 'proof' from other sources to help support their arguments. Exemplars of previous work are provided via Queen's online. In Stages 2 and 3 students also are required to produce an abstract. By this point, their writing is becoming more fluid. By Stage 3, students are expected to be able to describe and analyse a topic chosen from a series of themes and also to build their own position through writing. Several years of experimentation have confirmed that this is possibly the most effective tool in increasing students' confidence and ability in writing. This approach was shared with other disciplines at a lunchtime forum.

How do you do it? (method including tips)

In Stage 1, sessions provide guidance on:

- Essay writing
- Electronic research sources such as JSTOR, Lexis, Nexis
- Harvard referencing
- Turnitin plagiarism detection software.

Refresher sessions are offered at later Stages if required and skills development is supported right throughout the course. In Stage 3, the essay outline/pre-writing assignments are supplemented with a one minute, one slide presentation at mid-term. This encourages the students to understand the importance of creating and explaining an argument succinctly.

Small groups of students are also supported by PhD students to take part in focussed reading sessions in the studio space. The reading groups take on a much more significant role in Stages 2 and 3 when students discuss the week's reading in small groups and then submit work-sheets. These are discussed by the class and peer reviewed: this allows the students to develop a valuable graduate attribute.

Technology: QOL is used to share exemplars of previous work.

Evaluation/Reflection/Outcomes

How do you know it works? (measures you adopted, student feedback outcomes, staff feedback)

Students polled in 2011 commented: *'Coursework requirements very clear and the essay has the ability to be very stimulating'. 'Talking to other students about a reading shows you all the things you didn't notice but also makes you stand up for your opinion about the reading'.*

The length of the 'Writing Architecture' project has allowed staff to observe that this engagement with writing in each of the undergraduate Stages not only helps students to enhance their writing and synthesis skills, but also prepares them for employment in their 'year out' in practice and for the 10,000 word dissertation in the Master's programme.

71% of the graduating cohort found the outlines 'useful' or 'very useful'.

Since students often have a close, intense relationship with their design projects, they are now asked to choose an essay topic themselves. This alignment is helping to engage them with the skill of writing.

There has not yet been opportunity to gauge how the portfolio is impacting on students' professional development after graduation. However, an External Examiner highlighted it as 'good practice' in the overall undergraduate course:

'The introduction of individual written portfolios containing the collection of the coursework prepared throughout the programme is an idea which in my experience is unique to QUB but one which other schools may well seek to replicate'.

A survey conducted in 2012 generated positive feedback from students who had started the Writing Architecture Project in 2008, finished their BSc and spent a 'year out' in architectural practice. For 65% of these students, their undergraduate writing was useful as professionals in practice. For one student, the assignments contributed directly to employment, since the employer commented on the strength of the writing.

Challenges/Issues/Problems

In the future, the use of writing will become more closely aligned with the central object of the undergraduate architecture course: the design studio – this is the next challenge.

Advice and Tips

If using readings, keep them short!

In order to truly embed critical thinking and communication skills, students must engage early and often with writing across their undergraduate programme. This requires a dedicated team of staff who are cognizant of the vertical planning needed and willing to take the project forward as a team.

Looking forward

Effort has been made by the same staff on the March course with regard to the 10,000 word dissertation and it is hoped that when students who have benefited from the revised UG programme move into the March course, they will display more confidence in their writing skills.