

OPINION

A PEDAGOGY-CENTRED CURRICULUM

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1. Disconnect between education and practice

In June 2019, students from several architecture schools in Britain published an open letter to the architecture community pleading an urgent case for radical reform of curriculum in architectural education, arguing that the current system is ethically, socially and ecologically dysfunctional (Architecture Education Declares, 2019). The letter has since attracted over 2,100 signatures from students of several countries. Given this is a call for curriculum reform, one must not only look at architecture (the subject being taught) but also education (the means by which it is taught). Professional expertise is a necessary but insufficient condition, and education is a specialised subject in its own right. Therefore, this essay will examine the matter largely from the perspective of education.

Reading the letter, I am reminded of an incident that occurred over 20 years ago when I attended an informal lecture at the home of an architect friend in Bangalore. He had a house guest who was giving the lecture, a former college classmate who was teaching at a reputed architecture school in the US. This gentleman also did wonderful watercolour renderings, which were in great demand, given this was an era when photorealistic computer rendering was far from commonplace.

His talk consisted of two independent sections. In the first part, he showed work done by students in a recent design studio he had taught. In the second, he showed his renderings commissioned by commercial practices in the region. The difference in the quality of architecture on display in each part was striking. The student work was full of critical energy (leaving aside for the moment the question of whether that energy was correctly directed). The renderings, on the other hand, were wonderful as representative of an artistic craft, but the architecture they depicted was banal, making little effort to go beyond a robotic reproduction of the familiar. I questioned him on this difference, particularly noting that those local practices for which he did the renderings must be inhabited, to a significant extent, by graduates of the university where he was teaching. The fact that the renderings showed a loss of critical energy seemed to indicate that the education system has an inherent and collective capacity for amnesia.

He did not have a ready answer to my question. Ever since then, I have been thinking about this, and consequent observations in travels across the world have led me to the following conclusion: *the quality of architectural education in a region has little to do with the quality of architecture in the same region*. Some countries have a reputation for

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a rigorous high-quality education system. Others do not. Irrespective, in all regions, walk in any city and look at the work done by professionally trained architects and you see the same mix: a dominant majority of banal work, a few examples that are downright ugly, and a small minority of good work.

I believe this is because the education system schools students to think in terms that are external to the self: abstract philosophies, personality cults, established styles, fashions and trends, and appeal of visual form rather than personal empathy to imperatives of inhabitation. Once you are dependent on externalities, you can sustain them only when the context is similarly aligned. Graduate from school, move to a different context like commercial practice, and you have no means to resist being a chameleon, changing colours to suit the environment.

2. Mindless conformity and the failure of empathy

I had an experience about four years ago that verified this fact. I was visiting an internationally reputed architecture school in the United States of America, and being taken for a tour of the school building which had many double-height spaces and bridges traversing them, so you could stand on a bridge and observe more than one studio. I stood on one such bridge with two different studios to either side, each one taught by a famous star architect. Reviews were in progress, so work was pinned up on the walls. I was struck by the fact that even though there were many students in each studio, each student inherently a unique individual, all the designs within a studio fell into a uniformity that echoed the style and philosophy of the star architect who was the teacher.

Our modern education system holds at its core a systematised suppression of the independent learning self. As Ivan Illich states in his book *Deschooling Society*, the education system is designed “*to confuse process with substance.....the pupil is thereby schooled to confuse teaching with learning, grade advancement with education, a diploma with competence, and fluency with the ability to say something new*” (Illich, 1971). This deprives education of what should be its most powerful resource: the sense of wonder with which all children are naturally endowed. Instead of guiding students in constructively channeling this inner energy, we suppress it by intimidating them into feeling worthless if they cannot display a ‘sophistication’ that wraps their heads round externally defined standards of competence and knowledge.

The products of such a system who go on to become teachers breed a self-perpetuating cycle where teachers can exert their power in the studio or classroom only by suppressing the individuality of their students. This is not to say that every student and every teacher is like this. There are some students who are lucky to be born with an irrepressible inner energy, and such students flourish irrespective of the education they receive. And there are some teachers who are genuinely invested in the inner creativity and well-being of every student. But we must not judge an education system by what the best students and teachers do; we must measure it by the degree to which it empowers the average student and the contribution of the average teacher to this empowerment.

A self whose consciousness and sense of wonder has been suppressed is a self who has been stripped of the capacity for empathy. Given the consequent ‘empathy vacuum’ in the system, it is not surprising that the open letter from the architecture students is

pervaded with dismay over major ethical failures prevalent in the current system. The empathy deficit has another significant consequence: a self-absorbed inward focus within the profession. This begins in architecture school where pedagogic convention always places the student designer next to his/her work while speaking about it; explaining it to a teacher during a studio critique or defending it to a jury in an end-semester review.

A culture takes root that privileges the designer's voice and intentions, believing they are the primary source of meaning in the design. Scant recognition is granted to meaning generated by acts and memories of inhabitation or ecological flows: processes of life that silence the architect's voice because they come into play after the architect has completed the work and stepped away from it. This culture in the profession takes on another accent after graduation and entry into the world of professional design practice. The intangible and unquantifiable dimensions of quality in architecture create a demand for social validation beyond the designer's own intuitive satisfaction. The validation of academic assessment in college is replaced in professional practice by the validation of peer review, which continues to foreground the architect's voice and intentions, either directly or reconstructed through critique.

Practicing architects seek validation of their work through a series of questions focused on their peers. Does the work win design awards? Does it get published in reputed journals? Does it win competitions? Is it discussed with respect by peers and by teachers and students of architecture? Does it lead to invitations on the lecture circuit? These are all valid questions, but when they become the dominant mode of validation they breed a self-referential culture where architects design to satisfy other architects instead of the constituencies and ecologies their designs are meant to serve. Even worse, architects lose the ability to speak to non-architects on the value architecture can offer, becoming prisoners of a self-referential jargon. The sole exception is the need to convince a fee-paying client that the design meets their needs: a benchmark that is not conducive to recognition of wider societal or ecological benefits.

3. Why we need to reform architectural pedagogy

In the appeal from architecture students, the call is for reform of curriculum. Curriculum has three components: values, content, and pedagogy. The students' appeal and the responses so far have focused on the first two. The failure in values where curriculum makes scarce attempt to deal with current and overwhelming crises such as climate change, growing economic inequality and precariousness; where the intentions and desires of the architect are overriding. And the failure of content in the focus on a personality-centric, form-obsessed, jargon-driven architecture resting on first impressions rather than an architecture that adds value over time to life and dwelling. Scarce attention has been granted to pedagogy, the third component of curriculum. This is a significant gap as pedagogy is the core that holds the education system together.

The famous Brazilian educationist, Paulo Freire, argues that mainstream education is designed to make the classroom an unexciting place to be in because the motives for being there lie outside the classroom: the certified competence you can demonstrate at the end of the course, the grades you will receive, the job you can get, etc. In this system, the classroom is a place for transferring knowledge, the student is rendered passive, and the teacher privileged with an expertise the bestows dominant power in the

room. Freire argues for an inversion of this system (Freire, 1972). The classroom must be transformed into a place for *making* knowledge by the teacher relinquishing power through admitting his/her humility before the subject being taught, and deploying a pedagogy that places the subject between student and teacher so that both may explore it within the classroom. The excitement of discovery within the classroom becomes the primary motive for being there. The resultant buzz makes pedagogy the most visible component of curriculum, which is why it must form the core.

In the system that Freire proposes, teaching and learning happen through a pedagogic connection within the classroom where the teacher infects the students with his/her passion for the subject, leading to an excitement where students even infect each other with passion, and learning happens through firing these inner sparks of passion. But passion alone can be aggressive and dominating. For the pedagogic connection that lights the inner spark within others, passion must always be accompanied by her twin sister, compassion. The infection of passion and the empathy of compassion form the pedagogic core of education. Since empathy and humility lie at the core of this pedagogy, consciousness is directed outward to the world rather than inward to the self. This breeds what the philosopher Morris Berman calls *participating consciousness*, a far cry from the isolating ego-based consciousness that lies at the core of the current system.

4. Hope and vision for the future

Such an empathetic pedagogy would aim to construct the kind of professional defined in Donald Schön's seminal book *The Reflective Practitioner* (Schön, 1984). Schön delineates how professional education and practice tend to operate under a false model he terms 'The Model of Technical Rationality', where one first acquires a base of knowledge and skills and then applies them in practice. Practice is reduced to applied theory, and the only feedback loop for improvement is tangible experience. But the average professional practice challenge is far too unique, complex and indeterminate to be reducible to applied theory. Schön's study reveals how effective professionals develop a value system driving how they deploy their professional abilities to contribute to the world, and use each practice task as an opportunity to challenge, critique and expand this value system. In such a mode, practice critiques theory and theory critiques practice. The 'model of technical rationality' assumes an operating mode of 'reflection-and-action', whereas effective professionals develop a capacity for 'reflection-in-action'.

A pedagogy-centred curriculum does not rest on standards of content and values; its quest for reflective practice aims to inculcate students with the capacity to seek personal mastery, where content and values are embodied within a learning self who is on a continued quest for expanding excellence. In *The Fifth Discipline*, Peter Senge defines personal mastery as a creative tension held between a current personal reality and a hope and vision for the future (Senge, 2006). Effective learners hold this tension at the right level for it to be creative; knowing that stretching it too tight leads to alienation and burnout, whereas allowing it to become too slack leads to a capture by the familiar or habitual. Senge elaborates on the concept of personal mastery:

People with a high level of personal mastery share several basic characteristics. They have a special sense of purpose that lies behind their visions and goals. For

such a person, a vision is a calling rather than simply a good idea. They see current reality as an ally, not an enemy. They have learned how to perceive and work with forces of change rather than resist those forces. They are deeply inquisitive, committed to continually seeing reality more and more accurately. They feel connected to others and to life itself. Yet they sacrifice none of their uniqueness. They feel as if they are part of a larger creative process, which they can influence but cannot unilaterally control.

People with a high level of personal mastery live in a continual learning mode. They never “arrive”. Sometimes, language, such as the term “personal mastery”, creates a misleading sense of definiteness, of black and white. But personal mastery is not something you possess. It is a process. It is a lifelong discipline. People with a high level of personal mastery are acutely aware of their ignorance, their incompetence, their growth areas. And they are deeply self-confident. Paradoxical? Only for those who do not see that “the journey is the reward”.

5. Practical points for a new curriculum

Such a curriculum has deep implications for student, teacher, and institution:

- Implications for the student: The student must learn to trust herself, that her body, the sense of wonder it inherently holds, are sufficient to constitute the foundations of her learning. She leverages the challenges the institution throws at her to expand her personal mastery. She reaches out to the consciousness of other beings, nature, and materials in order to creatively empower her own consciousness to constructively participate in the world. She does not place faith in pure abstractions, but grounds herself in rigorous ego-transcending protocols of practice through which she embodies her own personal mastery.

- Implications for the teacher: The teacher is humble before the subject she teaches so that she may infect students with her passion for it. She steadfastly deploys her compassion so that she may nurture the inner voice of every student. She herself pursues personal mastery and openly places her mastery on the table so that it can be critiqued and dissected to offer the students a light at the end of the tunnel. Her teaching centres on openly offering tools, concepts and protocols that empower students to independently pursue personal mastery.

- Implications for the institution: In *The Learning Paradigm College*, John Tagg poses a fundamental question: Is the college primarily a place for producing learning, or is it primarily a place for delivering instruction? (Tagg, 2003). When this question is posed to college administrators, they tend to answer ‘producing learning’ without hesitation; but when pressed further on how the college is organised, it emerges that everything centres around instruction modules. What goes unaddressed is the fact that significant learning happens in the gaps between instruction modules, in the spaces outside modules, in practices of integration that do not form a part of any module. This gap leaves the system with a tacit assumption that learning is the mere sum of instructional modules.

- Strangely, a tool that is being touted as the foundation for a learning paradigm college has been found in design education for eons, but lying largely unused: the portfolio. A portfolio assembles work from multiple modules to constitute an integrated statement of learning and ability. Yet the portfolio is not part of the curriculum, and students are left to their own devices to construct portfolios after they graduate, when they need to seek a job or further education. The portfolio should be a mentored process

mainstreamed into the core of curriculum. For this to work, the institution should cast itself as a caring place, emotionally committed to the entire community of learners who constitute it — students, faculty and staff.

A pedagogy-centred curriculum sets out to produce students who are consistently creative selves, lifetime learners with an independent critical and artistic agency rooted in the essence of what it is to be human, whose consciousness participates constructively in the world, whose agency and commitment remain unaffected by superficial changes of context. The challenge is captured in a statement by Richard Shaull (which draws from the philosophy of Paulo Freire): “*There is no such thing as a neutral education process. Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate the integration of generations into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes the ‘practice of freedom’, the means by which men and women deal critically with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world.*” (Freire, 2019).

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