

Cecilia De Marinis

PEDAGOGICAL PERSPECTIVES IN CREATIVE PRACTICE RESEARCH

PhD as a training for studio teaching

AUTHOR

postdoc, School of Architecture & Design,
RMIT University
www.dap-r.info
cecilia.demarinis@rmit.edu.au

KEYWORDS

Design studio, architectural pedagogy, practice-based PhD.

ABSTRACT

The paper addresses the nature of studio teaching in creative disciplines and its role within the framework of the practice-based PhD, exploring the interaction between practice, research and teaching, and how practice informs teaching and the content of design studio, whereas simultaneously studio teaching can act as research to inform the practice. The PhD works as a training for teaching, opening up pedagogical perspectives, improving skills, methods and techniques, allowing thus practitioners to become better studio teachers. As part of the DAP_r project, a survey of examples from completed PhD has been undertaken collecting evidence of improved pedagogical practices through doctoral training and looking at the productive ways in which studio teaching has interfaced with the PhD process and the potential benefits for learners in architecture and design studios of such improvements.

INTRODUCTION: THE DAP_R PROGRAM

This paper will address the nature of studio teaching in creative disciplines, its role within the framework of the practice-based PhD and the value of such a doctoral training for studio pedagogy. The paper aims then to disseminate a series of findings and insights emerging from DAP_r - Design and Architecture Practice research - an ongoing research project funded by the Australian Office for Learning and Teaching.

DAP_r is a collaboration of 14 Australian universities (Bond University, Charles Sturt University, Deakin University, Monash University, University of Newcastle, Queensland University of Technology, University of Canberra, University of New South Wales, University of Adelaide, University of South Australia, University of Tasmania, University of Technology Sydney and University of Western Australia), led by RMIT University, aiming to disseminate the creative practice-based PhD model across Australia, facilitating the adoption and adaptation of such a model within different academic institutions and strengthening a national network, by providing a sharing platform for discussion. PhD candidates and supervisors from different institutions meet twice a year in occasion of the Practice Research Symposium at RMIT University to share their knowledge within the field of Creative Practice Research.

The research work I am pursuing within the DAP_r program as a postdoctoral research fellow, explores the value of the practice-based PhD training and its contributions to professional practice and academia, specifically in relation to pedagogical approaches to studio teaching.

The research aims to contribute to the debate over the role and contribution of doctoral training within academic and professional realms. The findings emerging from the study will be then applied to inform further refinement of doctoral training programs and to strengthen the connection between practice, research and teaching.

This paper will specifically focus on the contribution that the practice-based doctoral training can provide to the realm of the academic studio, starting from the assumption that the studio environment is at the core of design teaching and learning.

STUDIO TEACHING AND THE PRACTICE-BASED PHD FRAMEWORK

Studio Evolution

The origins of studio model are traceable in the medieval system of apprenticeships within the system of the guilds (Schön, 1985) in which the apprentice regularly went to the master's studio in order to learn the craft. The practice

of the art has been thus taught for a long time in the artist, master, craftsman or architect's studio - the apprentice learnt by being immersed in the studio environment by observing, listening, copying, repeating.

Later, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Ecole de Beaux Arts marked the birth of the Studio as a place for collective learning-by-doing under the guidance of a master, moving the learning environment from the artist's studio to a place specifically intended for the purpose of learning by practice.

Since then, the studio model has been developed and transformed over time, becoming the core framework for the most important references of learning models, such as the Bauhaus in the 30' and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology later in the '80.

Studio teaching is a model in continuous transformation, as its evolution follows the evolution of practice itself.

Value and features of Studio Teaching

As Maitland (1991) claims "studio teaching is not just a space marked "studio". It is a way of thinking and learning." The Studio is critical and essential to creative practice, it has indeed a high pedagogical value, due to the way studio learning environments bring students into a deep understanding of practice. Studio reflects into practitioners' studio and as such it prepares students to be practitioners.

As Schön (1985: 32) suggests, it opens up a window to practice and its procedures: "When we gain access to a window on the architectural studio, we have a chance to observe, in a peculiarly accessible form, the process of architectural designing; here, more than in any other context, architect need to make clear to one another what is they do when they design".

The Studio is hence a space for challenge not only to students but also to teachers, who are required to put in clear words what is what they actually do when they design, being able to communicate through different media what is the matter of design and its mechanisms.

Studio teaching is a process of learning by doing and by observing others, it is indeed "a unique and distinct mode of cognition." (Bates, 2015) enabling people to gather in a collective space where learning to think as designers, coming in contact with the practice.

The Studio is where design skills are developed and passed on, where students develop as designers and reflect upon their skills and the skills of others.

The studio experience can be then seen as a self-explorative journey for students, through which they are invited to find their own way, learning tools more than notions. The process involves different elements such as

self-awareness, memory, imagination, repetition of actions, attempts, observation, and reflection on the process itself.

The Studio shows the paradox laying in the process of teaching and learning new competencies or understanding. Such a paradox of knowing is explained by Socrates through the question: “And how will you inquire into a thing when you are wholly ignorant of what it is? Even if you happen to bump right into it, how will you know it is the thing you didn’t know?” (Plato, Anas-taplo, G., & Berns, L., 2004).

Students are learning things whose meaning and importance they can grasp ahead on time. The process of learning within the studio is thus a transformative one, the students will go through such a transformation discovering their abilities as practitioners/designers. As Solnit (2006) suggests: “The things we want are transformative, and we don’t know or only think we know what is on the other side of that transformation.”

Studio as the mirror of the practice

The pedagogic mechanisms at the core of studio are similar to the processes at play in a creative practice. Studio can then be seen as the mirror of the practice, considering its main features such as the embedded spirit of open enquiry, the focus on creativity, the action of drawing, the attitude towards problem solving, the “fast thinking” (Kannemann, 2011) the reiteration, and the physical process of working with material by hand. All of these elements contribute to build new knowledge and come to understand the design thinking.

Openness and uncertainty are also conditions shared between the studio and the practice, being in fact tools for the design process itself and allowing the design process to happen.

The same approach to enquiry and the way of thinking can be found in both studio environment and professional practice. Methods, standards, procedures of practice can be indeed applied to the studio environment.

Furthermore, the physical characteristics of the studio environment mirror the space of the practice office, as well as the modes of acquiring and sharing knowledge through collaboration and conversation. There is also a similarity in the use of time since intensive design sessions are experienced and required for the design process to happen.

Therefore, practice informs teaching and the content of design studio. This informing process can be seen as bi-directional, as it is not only the practice influencing the studio with its features but also the studio acting as a research to positively inform the practice. It is a mutual exchange, in which student and teacher learn from each other and both learn from the environment itself.

The Studio Teacher

Richard Blythe (2015: 111) describes the studio as: ‘(...) fecund, slightly unpredictable, and both subject to and responsive to environmental fluctuation. Like the Mad Hatter’s party, though, it also requires a host and a guest list for it to work well.’

The role of the ‘host’ namely the teacher in the studio is indeed a key and challenging one. In this space, not only students are challenged but teachers and their skills and abilities too. The Studio is indeed a place for discussion and development, produced through the continuous dialogue between students and the teacher.

Being a studio teacher, one assumes the role of a guide and it brings with it a matter of responsibility and trust. As suggested by Schön (1985:59) the teacher formulates an initial contract with student “(...) on which the effectiveness of design education depends, requires that the student makes a willing suspension of disbelief, in spite of its perceived risk, and that the studio master invites him to do so.”

The student must trust the teacher in order to go through the learning process. Trust is indeed the common ground for the relationship to grow and create the mental space for students to learn.

Time is crucial in order to build such a relationship, as learning can happen only through reiteration in time, creating the conditions under which such relationship can develop.

An interesting element for the teacher to consider is the need for clarity and explicit communication, as suggested by Schön (1985:6) “(...) some instructors have learned to become not only master practitioners but master coaches. They have learned to respond to the imperative, present in the studio as it is often not in the practice, to make design assumptions, strategies and values explicit”.

Moreover, the learning process passes not only through words but also through observation and repetition, so the teacher needs also to acquire the ability to communicate beyond words, showing actions, processes, and methods in practice.

Hence, being a teacher requires the development of a series of ability such as openness, curiosity, listening, and the ability to challenging others. Teaching is in itself a process of learning by doing and acquiring new knowledge for the teacher through the dialogue with students.

The PhD and the Studio Teaching

This research work specifically explores the ways in which studio teaching has interfaced with doctoral training, observing the interwoven relationship

between practice, research and teaching and how they are brought together in mutually beneficial ways.

A series of key similar elements between the PhD training framework and Studio teaching model emerged from the exploration.

First, the process of learning by doing is fully embedded in the two training models,] PhD Candidates are invited to engage with their practice investigating what is the matter of what they are doing as practitioners and what are their fascinations, urges, methods, procedures, and specificities. Practitioners in the role of teachers invite students to do so within the studio environment, namely exploring their own interests and learning by doing and observing themselves.

Also, practitioners who undertake a practice-based PhD come to experience again the feeling of being on the side of the learner. This will allow them to put themselves in the students' shoes and better understand their vulnerable position.

Another aspect of this similarity lies in the process of collaboration and engaging in conversation which is indeed a key feature of creative practice itself. The two models are structured through a conversational approach in which the learning process passes through observing others, sharing, dialoguing. New shared knowledge is indeed produced through conversation, informing the design process. Creative practitioners constantly work "with people for people" (Lynas, Budge & Beale, 2013) and the opinion of others inform the direction in which design takes. This process is experienced also within the studio where the environment "allows students room to explore, evaluate, compare and contrast themselves against their peers." (Lynas, Budge & Beale, 2013:132).

The practice-based PhD trains thus practitioners in making explicit assumptions, strategies and values, developing their ability to engage and communicate to others. It is a process of conversion of "knowing-in-action" (Schon, 1985) or transformation from tacit to explicit knowledge. This aspect may give them new skills as teachers and may influence the way they act within the studio environment, bringing them to invite students to go through a learning process they have already experienced.

Research Methodology: a conversational approach

As part of the DAP_r project a survey of examples from completed PhD has been undertaken, collecting evidence of improved pedagogical practices through the PhD study and looking at the potential benefits for learners in architecture and design studios of such improvements.

The adopted methodology underpinning this research work makes reference to a conversational approach, starting from the assumption that the

process of creating new knowledge happens through conversation and exchange.

The research methods lie on the sphere of the Qualitative Research broad methodological approach coming mainly from the field of the social disciplines. Qualitative methods examine motivations and modes besides the quantitative and dimensional analysis. Within this methodology the understanding of phenomenon follows a heuristic approach and the methods are usually more flexible, making easier and informal the interaction and collaboration between the researcher and the participant.

In this research work, two main data collection methods have been used, namely Individual Interviews and Focus Groups.

For the Individual Interviews, among other options, the model of the structured interview has been chosen and followed. This method allows to easily compare the results, as interviewees are invited to answer the same questions. In this research work, interviews have been organised through a first meeting fostering an informal conversation and encouraging reflection across the questions, inviting than interviewees to take their time to answer the questions in a written format afterwards. This method allows time for deep reflection and settlement of the initial inputs.

Within the DAP_r program, 20 creative practitioners that completed their practice-based PhD in the last 10 years have been interviewed. The selection of interviewees has been done aiming to have a broad range of PhDs, coming from different institutions and fields and at different distance in time from the PhD completion. This allows comparison among different models, ways of interpreting the PhD and perceptions of PhD contribution over time.

The Focus Group works instead as a moderated group interview process, aiming to trigger collective debate and interchange among participants. The Focus Group is intended to provide a platform for the exchange of thoughts and impressions aiming to build collective knowledge inviting participants to share their experience and engage in the discussion.

During the Practice Research Symposium that took place at RMIT University in June 2017, a focus group has been organised entitled “Mapping Impact in Creative Practice Research” as an occasion for triggering the debate over possible meanings, interpretations and perspectives of the value and contribution of doctoral training on both professional practice and pedagogical approaches in Creative Practice Research, collecting evidences and expectations both from PhD Candidates and Completed PhDs, through a process of collectively building a map of meanings.

FIRST RESEARCH FINDINGS: HOW THE PRACTICE-BASED PHD INFORMS PEDAGOGY

This paragraph will show a series of insights coming from the data collected through the undertaken research operations, in relation to the contribution of doctoral training to approaches to studio teaching. Creative practitioners interviewed within the DAP_r program mentioned indeed the productive ways in which studio teaching has interfaced with the PhD process.

Risk as a learning tool

A manifold number of practitioners mentioned the idea of being more open to including the concept of “risk” in studio teaching, after completing PhD training. Such an openness to the unknown and unforeseen and a sense of being able of relinquishing control are abilities that creative practitioners acquire from gaining self-confidence through the PhD process and experiencing the same openness while undertaking the PhD journey.

Some practitioners mentioned the effect of having become better at encouraging students to undertake their own path instead of following teachers’ rules and procedures. The PhD process trains indeed practitioners to be better listeners.

Others suggested the idea that design processes are necessarily non-linear, disorganised and messy and that being strongly aware and able to communicate this to students is also empowering them.

They also mentioned how after the PhD teaching strategies have changed emphasising listening and figuring out what students need themselves, nudging towards their own awareness, in a less directed or judgemental way, also asking students to set their own level of risk in the research.

So, experiencing risk across the PhD journey trains practitioners to apply it as a learning tool and teach students how to make use of it.

After completing the PhD a number of practitioners experienced a shift in their interpretation of pedagogy, leaving behind a ‘skills & training’ and prioritising prioritised over a pedagogy of ‘reflection & research’, learned and tested through the PhD.

Translating teaching techniques

Furthermore, practitioners express the idea of applying teaching techniques learned through the PhD process, making reference to their supervisors’ strategies. Also, practitioners become more aware of their role as mentors within the studio environment and their responsibility towards students, gaining this awareness from the observation and experience of their relationship

with supervisors. So their way of engaging with students changes being informed by the supervisory process they have experienced. They thus translate behaviours, strategies, approaches they have experienced through the PhD, in actions within the Studio.

Ability to articulate

A major impact is visible for practitioners in the ability to articulate, the way they speak and make use of language at different levels, in a conscious way. Such an ability arises from an increased confidence and authority acquired through the PhD training.

In relation to studio teaching, this increased capacity to articulation makes practitioners able to provide a clear framework to students, thus allowing them to construct their own path.

Practitioners mentioned how their discourse has become less prescriptive favouring the pedagogies of reflection and research as well as more precise when talking about drivers and fascinations that carry design processes and move them forwards. Openness and precision are indeed two relevant elements for the learning process, allowing teachers to be able to share their knowledge with students in a meaningful way.

A community of practice

Having being embedded in a process of learning from others during the PhD journey, practitioners also mentioned this as a learning tool that they see and encourage within the studio. They also perceive that students respond well to the idea of a Community of Practice, and is often a starting point for them to become aware of their own peer groups and of the larger set of things that implicitly and explicitly influence the design decisions in their work.

CONCLUSION

From the first insights coming from this ongoing research, it emerges how undertaking a PhD by practice allows creative practitioners to improve their pedagogical skills, methods and techniques, becoming better studio teachers. The PhD works then as a training for teaching, opening up pedagogical perspectives to the eye of the practitioner.

Doctoral training is, therefore, a pedagogical tool that allows practitioners to investigate their practice and research as an indissoluble whole, exploring at the same time the connection with the praxis of teaching, as an element strictly related to creative practice and research.

REFERENCES

- Bates, D 2015, 'Past futures and future pasts: The architecture studio', in Bates, D, Mitsogianni, V and Ramirez-Lovering, D (eds) 2015, *Studio Futures. Changing trajectories in architectural education*, Uro Publications, Melbourne, pp. 72-73.
- Bernard, H 1988, *Research Methods in Cultural Anthropology*, Sage Publications, Newbury Park, CA.
- Blythe, R 2015, 'The design studio: some constellational aspects', in Bates, D, Mitsogianni, V and Ramirez-Lovering, D (eds) 2015, *Studio Futures. Changing trajectories in architectural education*, Uro Publications, Melbourne, pp. 109-114.
- Carter, E and Doyle, J 2015, 'Peer-to-peer pedagogy/practice', in Bates, D, Mitsogianni, V and Ramirez-Lovering, D (eds) 2015, *Studio Futures. Changing trajectories in architectural education*, Uro Publications, Melbourne, pp. 33-38.
- Flavell, JH 1985, *Cognitive development*, NJ, Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs.
- Kahneman, D 2011, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York.
- Lynas, E, Budge, K and Beale, C 2013, 'Hands on: The importance of studio learning in design education', *Visual Enquiry: Learning & Teaching Art*, 2(2), pp. 127-138.
- Maitland, BM 1991, 'Problem-based Learning for an Architecture Degree', in Boud, D and Feletti, G (eds) 1991, *The Challenge of problem-based Learning*, Kogan Page, London.
- Mewburn, I 2010, 'Reconsidering reflective practice and design studio pedagogy', *Arts & Humanities in Higher Education*, 2(4), pp. 363-379.
- Anastaplo, G and Berns, L 2004, *Plato*, MA, Newburyport.
- Schön, D 1985, *The Design Studio. Exploration of its Traditions and Potential*, RIBA Publications Limited, London.
- Solnit, D 2006, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*, Canongate, Edinburgh.
- Vaughan, L (eds) 2017, *Practice-based Design Research*, Bloomsbury Academic, New York.