ENGAGED LEARNING IN DESIGN EDUCATION:
REFLECTIONS FROM THE WORKSHOP (21.09.2023)

This report reflects on the key themes and insights shared during SArPe's Engaged Learning Workshop organised at TU Delft.

The SArPe initiative is a collective effort towards substantially changing the field of architectural education. The objective is to establish a teaching and learning environment that is socially situated, addressing the significant gap that often exists between architecture studies and the practical issues encountered in the real world. SArPe is a meeting point that brings together various interdisciplinary viewpoints, facilitating the gathering of scholars, professionals, and students to engage in discourse regarding the prospective trajectory of architectural education.

The workshop explored innovative pedagogical methods in architectural education, focusing on inclusivity, empathy, discomfort, failure acceptance, expectation management, and institutionalisation. Drawing on presentations and discussions from the workshop, this report synthesises the key takeaways and their implications for reimagining architectural education.

The Aspect of Time and Foregrounding

Foregrounding is a nuanced concept that has been gaining traction in the academic literature on community engagement and pedagogical practices. According to Eisenstad and McLellon (2020), foregrounding is not a singular action but a multi-dimensional approach that encompasses practical, epistemological, and affective dimensions.

From a practical standpoint, foregrounding involves the meticulous planning and preparation that precedes any form of community engagement. It requires educators and students to understand the social, cultural, and economic contexts in which they will operate. This understanding is crucial for tailoring pedagogical methods to the specific needs and challenges of the community.

Epistemologically, foregrounding calls for a shared understanding of the types of knowledge that will be produced during the engagement. It challenges traditional academic hierarchies by valuing community knowledge as equally significant as academic knowledge. This epistemic inclusivity fosters a more democratic and

equitable learning environment.

On the affective dimension, foregrounding addresses the emotional and relational aspects of community engagement. It acknowledges the "felt ties and aversions" that exist between different stakeholders, emphasising the importance of building trust and emotional resonance over the long term (Eisenstadt & McLellan, 2020).

The multi-dimensionality of foregrounding inherently demands a significant investment of time. This aligns with the broader discourse on community engagement in higher education. Meaningful relationships between educational institutions and local communities cannot be established in haste. Instead, these relationships require a long-term commitment to realise tangible benefits for all stakeholders involved (Cinar & Benneworth, 2021).

The aspect of time, therefore, is not merely a logistical consideration but a fundamental component of a socially responsible pedagogical approach. It calls for a shift from short-term, project-based engagements to more sustainable, long-term relationships. This long-term perspective is essential for addressing complex societal challenges that cannot be solved within the confines of a semester or academic year.

Empathy as a Designer's Skill

Empathy, often considered an innate human quality, was discussed as a skill that can and should be cultivated within the educational setting. This perspective challenges the traditional notion that empathy is a static trait, suggesting instead that it is a dynamic skill that can be developed and refined (Pagán, 2014).

The Eindhoven Empathy Model provides a useful framework for understanding the mechanics of empathy. According to this model, empathy is a function of ability and proximity (E=AP). To empathise effectively, one must possess both empathic ability and proximity to the other person's experience. The model suggests that these factors can be cultivated through targeted educational interventions, such as mindfulness meditation and experiential learning (Pagán, 2014).

The Value of Discomfort

Discomfort, often avoided in traditional educational settings, was highlighted as a valuable aspect of the learning process. The discussions emphasised that discomfort

serves as a catalyst for challenging existing hierarchies and power dynamics. This aligns with the broader discourse on inclusive education, which argues that discomfort is essential for dismantling systemic inequalities (De Genova, 2013).

The value of discomfort extends beyond the individual learner to the collective learning environment. It serves as a mechanism for fostering a culture of critical inquiry and social responsibility. By embracing discomfort, educational institutions can create spaces that are conducive to the exploration of complex social and ethical issues.

Acceptance of Failure and Expectation Management

The discussions emphasised the importance of accepting failure as an integral part of the learning process. This perspective challenges the traditional success-oriented educational paradigms that often stigmatise failure. By accepting failure as a natural outcome of the learning process, educational institutions can foster a culture of experimentation and innovation.

Expectation management emerged as a closely related theme. The discussions highlighted the importance of setting realistic expectations for all stakeholders involved. This involves being transparent about the limitations and uncertainties inherent in any educational endeavour. By managing expectations effectively, educational institutions can mitigate the risks of disappointment and disillusionment, thereby fostering a more resilient learning environment.

Institutional Support and Mandate

The success of engaged learning initiatives is contingent upon institutional support and mandate. A case study in the effective institutionalisation of engaged learning practices serves as an example. The project demonstrates the importance of securing a mandate from the top levels of the educational institution. Without such a mandate, even the most well-intentioned initiatives are likely to flounder.

Conclusion

The workshop plays a significant role in the continuous dialogue concerning architectural education. It brings to the fore critical issues that have long been sidelined in traditional pedagogical paradigms. By emphasising the importance of time, empathy, discomfort, failure, and institutional support, the workshop lays the groundwork for a more engaged, empathetic, and socially responsible approach to architectural and urban design education.

References

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