

## Beyond Research

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### Introduction

Why? Was an open question given as the final exam for a group of undergraduate students at Tulane University. The students were perplexed over the question and did not know what to write, some left it blank while others struggled as they wrote philosophical essays. After submitting the papers the students eagerly wanted to know the answer. Was it possible one open question could determine their success or failure in the class? After critical reflection, the only simple, direct, response was staring at them right in the face. Why not? So in retrospect was it a final exam? In fact it transformed quickly into an exploration in critical thinking, a workshop, which saw students engage in debate and discussion. Students may have learned from this experience years later perhaps more so than if it were the real exam. Therefore, sometimes creative learning methods may be necessary to transform students from passive listeners to active learners.

This paper aims to present workshops not only as a tool for conducting research but also as a platform to learn from both facilitator and participant. As a pedagogical tool workshops can be used to bridge the research and teaching divide. The various techniques used in workshops provide opportunities for many discussions and exchange of ideas gaining rich insights into people's perceptions and understandings on a given topic. The paper will also demonstrate how workshops can be employed as an effective tool for education and show how this approach may be used to promote more open-ended thinking and that there is not always one right answer. Finally, a proposed workshop design will be presented that covers a set of topics throughout the semester for UG/March/Masters students.

### *Why workshops*

A workshop is an interactive, participatory group exercise. It may be used for many purposes ranging from education, training, research to public engagement and collaboration. It may introduce something new through a series of training seminars or be a way to enhance professional skills and learning about new developments in the field. According to the University College London's Public

Engagement Unit it is a method that can "be used to gauge and compare opinions on a range of different aspects, criteria or qualities of a project or activity". They describe workshops as, "a means of capturing more qualitative information ... probing the meanings participants give to their behaviour, ascertaining reasons, motives and intentions"<sup>1</sup>. In summary it provides an interactive way to understand different people's experiences and views and is a good opportunity for discussion and to reach a direction or consensus on a given topic. An interactive workshop has many values that may significantly contribute to a research study. It not only provides an opportunity to gain direct insight into people's many meanings and understandings of the subject but also gives a practical platform to introduce different research methods in a few hours.

However, workshops go beyond research, being an effective pedagogical tool in almost all academic levels and professional development. The teacher's role has moved from lecturing the class to becoming a "facilitator of a conference". The teacher does not remain passive, but rather, helps "direct and mold discussions by posing strategic questions and helping students build on each other's ideas"<sup>2</sup>. Therefore, the workshop becomes an essential tool for teachers to develop innovative instructional approaches and to incorporate active learning strategies as means to encourage critical thinking.

### *Promotes critical thinking*

Although students are learning the basic information in core subject areas, they are not learning to apply their knowledge effectively in thinking and reasoning<sup>3</sup>. Students need to "develop and effectively apply critical thinking skills to their academic studies, to the complex problems that they will face, and to the critical choices they will be forced to make as a result of the information explosion and other rapid technological changes"<sup>4</sup>. The flexibility and often open-ended nature of workshops enables instructors to design specifically to meet student needs while support the development of cross-curricular working to encourage creative thinking. The discussions and exchange of ideas between teacher and student and from student to student allows workshops to not only encourage but enhance critical thinking.

### *Encourages Creativity*

Sounds of jazz welcomed students as they entered one University of Sheffield classroom. Students were pleasantly surprised to hear music, some smiled others continued talking to friends. Five minutes after the scheduled class time the door was closed and music stopped, which signaled the beginning of the workshop. The music had changed the class in some way. It created an upbeat atmosphere and maintained a tone throughout the class that sparked much discussion. Though subtle the method managed to invite students to participate and be more actively involved in the classroom.

Creativity "is the ability to transcend traditional ideas, rules, patterns, relationships, or the like, and to create meaningful new ideas, forms, methods, interpretations"<sup>5</sup>. By employing different and innovative teaching methods in the form of group activities, presentations, and other interactive exercises, teachers are encouraging creative expression from students. Therefore, equally important is the platform in which an exchange of creative expressions may be successfully achieved. One proven method is the workshop. There is something about workshops that makes them exciting. At the same time they provide an intensive educational experience by employing different ways of teaching people in a usually short period of time.

### *Fosters student participation*

Workshops are a form of collective exercises that may breakdown into smaller group activities. They encourage more participation among students, which in turn will develop their communication, teamwork, presentation, creative thinking and problem-solving skills. There are many methods in which instructors may engage students in discussions and exchange of ideas. Moreover, group-learning situations foster critical thinking, as Cooper argues, "In properly structured cooperative learning environments, students perform more of the active, critical thinking with continuous support and feedback from other students and the teacher"<sup>6</sup>. One technique that facilitators may employ to encourage participation is a quick exchange presentation. This is a face-to-face activity that is meant to quickly start conversation usually by students briefly discussing their topics.

To promote more interactive and engaging learning environments some academic institutions have designed their classrooms to allow more flexibility for the workshop experience. One such example is at the University of Minnesota's Active Learning Classroom or ALC<sup>7</sup> (Figure 1). They are student-centered, technology-rich, learning environments that feature large round tables which may seat up to nine students. Although there is no clear front

or focal point in the classroom it has been an effective learning environment with high student satisfaction levels.



Figure 1: Active Learning Center model classroom

### *Workshop issues*

Although workshops have many benefits they also have a few disadvantages. Essential for any workshop is its development and preparations from both facilitator and participant, which may take more time than traditional learning environments. Similarly, due to the open nature of workshops, plans do not always go as planned, which may mean wasting time by exploring divergent paths. Finally, the lack of harmony within the group may make it more challenging for the facilitator to direct and engage with the workshop's participants. However, these obstacles may be overcome in time, the more the facilitators experience workshops the more they are able to face the many challenges associated with an open-ended educational environment.

### *Workshop design for UG/March/Masters students*

After highlighting the many added values in using workshops, this section will present how workshops may be used as an effective pedagogical tool in architectural education. Specifically it will propose a study program for sustainability for UG/March/Masters students. The idea is to use workshops as a vehicle to enhance students' learning experience while bringing together topics from other disciplines that relate to sustainability. The structure of the course will be divided into a series of workshops; each workshop series will have a theme that revolves around sustainability in architecture and other disciplines. Using a participatory teaching model, the themes will be generated during student discussions during the first workshop. This strategy will also allow teachers and students to explore topics of interest within sustainability that may go beyond architecture.

The students will be asked to come up with four words that express the concept of sustainability, which in turn will be the themes for the workshops. For the purposes of designing the workshop series the following words have been chosen; resilience, culture, technology, and nature. Each word will be used as a theme for a series of workshops. Each word will also be further explored and divided into sub-themes. The workshop will break up into 5 groups of around 4 students with each group responsible for a sub-theme. For example, if we use culture as a theme for a workshop series, it may be divided into the following categories; vernacular design, social sustainability, policy, traditional, and modernity. Each group will be assigned a theme and is responsible to research and present assignments that will be later presented to the entire workshop.

Furthermore, each series of workshops will use different methods and approaches during their investigation. The most common approach is to give each group research projects that may result in submitting papers, displaying posters or giving a presentation. Another series of workshops may include visiting local sustainable initiatives, companies, or buildings. Alternatively, the workshops may be a design competition between student groups to encourage creative sustainable design solutions. For example, it may be in the form of a design and build project for a "sustainable wall". Or they may participate in the design and build of projects that may support sustainable community living such as a neighbourhood garden.

It is the intention that these workshops will provide the course with a platform for not only creative teaching but also a way to stimulate students to think creatively. These strategies aim to develop students' communication, teamwork, presentation, creative thinking, and problem-solving skills. At the same time it will enable the class to cover a wide range of subjects and disciplines using different methods in a short amount of time.

#### *Proposed Sustainability Workshop Series*

The following is a proposed outline for the sustainability workshop series. Each workshop will be sub-divided into a series of around 5 workshops that will build on one another while examining each theme in detail.

**Workshop 1:** Introduction to Sustainability: the built environment and beyond. The opening session will cover selection of the workshop themes and designation of student groups. Duration: 1 two-hour session.

**Workshop 2:** Resilience: The workshop will include a series of sub-workshops and themes, which will employ various

group activities, presentations, and discussion. Duration: 5 two-hour sessions.

**Workshop 3:** Culture: The workshop will include a series of sub-workshops and themes, which will employ various group activities, presentations, and discussion. Duration: 5 two-hour sessions.

**Workshop 4:** Nature: The main workshop will include a series of sub-workshops and themes, which will use various field activities and site visits. Duration: 3 two-hour site visits.

**Workshop 5:** Technology: The main workshop will include a series of sub-workshops and themes to design and build a given project. Duration: 5 two-hour sessions.

#### **Conclusion**

Research workshops provide a platform where "findings from the different elements of a mixed method study are best combined like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle with the aim of gaining a more complex understanding of the social world"<sup>8</sup>. Similarly, educational workshops bring together elements from various learning techniques with the aim of enhancing understandings and knowledge on any given subject. The present paper highlighted the potential of workshops to be effective tools in education and provided a proposed design for UG/March/Masters students. The proposed programme is only one approach that employs workshops in architectural education, however, the possibilities may be endless for creating different interactive learning experiences.

It is the hope that teachers, students and institutions may work together to elevate the quality of education, which in turn will provide the building blocks of a productive and healthy society. Education is like a jewel, and the more effective the methods to promote creative expression and knowledge, the more it will grow into a treasure for generations to come.

#### **References**

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