# On Being a First-Year Student: A Hidden Perspective in the Design Studio

DUAA AL MAANI
Welsh School of Architecture, Cardiff University

This research provides an important opportunity to advance our understanding of the evolving conception of learning in the design studio and specifically how first year students at architecture schools adapt to their new learning environment.

Many teachers of architecture would argue that the purpose of the design studio, which is the core of architectural education, is to educate the students to understand the nature of design, to think independently, to act in designerly ways (Cross, 1982), and to become reflective practitioners (Schön, 1983). Moreover, the first-year studio is of particular significance due to the challenges that face students in adapting to the new learning environment and in assuming a new learner identity. The first year plays a significant role in shaping students' attitudes and performances in subsequent years (Tinto 1993). It is typically the stage where students' expectations are reinforced or dis- pelled, ways of thinking established, and the foundations laid for the development of the independent learner. As such, the point of entry into university education represents a major event in the education of the individual and marks a transition that presents a variety of challenges to students. Accordingly, it is necessary to study the first-year experiences and how stu- dents are able to reflect on it to develop how we teach design.

Ten students were interviewed at several times during their first year at architecture school, gathering useful insights from students themselves about their evolving conceptions and expectations of learning throughout the academic year. The findings indicate that although all students felt positive about their learning experience, not all were satisfied they had fulfilled their individual learning needs. Students' conception of design iteration evolved during the first year; design mod- ifications were a source of frustration at the beginning of the year, and through time students came to understand its role as an educational technique that helps them to learn from their own work and the work of others as well. Feedback was frequent, occurring in both formal and informal ways, and was not limited to feedback from tutors, but was also offered by peers, upper years, visiting critiques and experts. Students positively compared learning within a studio context to the traditional way of learning in high schools and other disciplines in higher education.

One-to-one interaction with tutors and learning from peers and upper years, together with the open-ended, exploratory, and iterative nature of the design process, suggest that the design studio is a student-centered learning environment that promotes engagement and independence. The evidence derived from students' lived experiences shows a moderately positive attitude towards reflective independence, rather than passive

learning in the process of acquiring knowledge, as students were largely ready to take responsibility for their learning and take on challenges.

Despite the previous positive aspects, the findings also indicated some areas of disquiet. Students raised the issue of time as the biggest challenge facing them during their work on design projects. The maintenance of study habits developed in high school was another indication of students' resistance to the new mode of learning during their first year. Some students remain attached to the idea of being pushed to learn, and still need the reassurance and support from their tutors that they are 'doing it right'. Nevertheless, as the students continue their journey through architecture school, they are expected to become more aware of their new learning situations, which may subsequently enable them to question their former learning habits and become more independent and reflective.

REFERENCES

Cross, N. (1982). Designerly Ways of Knowing. Design studies, 3(4), 221–227
Schön, D. (1983). The Reflective Practitioner
Tinto, V. (1993). Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition

ON BEING A FIRST-YEAR STUDENT