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Teaching Land-scape through Story-telling

Learning from the subjective to traverse disciplines

Antonia Walker

Faculty of Arts and Architecture, University of Brighton

Abstract

This case study describes an approach to teaching landscape which prioritises the student's subjective and experiential position as the basis for their learning development. Mixed media projects provide the framework for a multi-disciplinary group to explore the relationship between methodology, representation and idea. The case study focuses on the learning and teaching methodologies adopted within a 10 week course for undergraduates within the Faculty of Arts and Architecture at the University of Brighton and will have relevance to a wide range of students studying art, design and architecture.

Keywords: Landscape, Architecture, Experiential Learning, Collaborative Learning

Introduction

'A conception is not a stable entity within a person's mind; it is a way that the person relates to the world outside the person. The 'world outside' includes the subject matter of academic disciplines: the principles and concepts the discipline uses to explain phenomena of ideas, and its characteristic ways of discovery and explaining'.

Ramsden (1992, p.40)

There appears to be little research on teaching methodology for the subject of landscape. Landscape has become increasingly significant as a cultural reference [predominantly metaphorical and visual], but there is little discussion of this development within education. Thwaites (2003) describes 'Experiential Landscape Place' as a theoretical approach to teaching landscape, but this is located within the discipline of Landscape Architecture. There is little recognition within pedagogy of how landscape as an inter-disciplinary subject is approached from different perspectives; crossing disciplines from geography to art, through soil structure to metaphor. Built environment courses often approach landscape as the physical environment and may reduce the potential of the subject by compartmentalising it into elements which can be managed, measured and visualised. Can we utilise the trans-disciplinary knowledge held within landscape if we approach it as a subject we can learn from rather than a subject we teach?

Course Overview

The approach to landscape through the course reflects references and theories drawn from cultural geography, human geography and urbanism, relevant to art, design and architecture. The course explores the relationships raised through contemporary discussions on landscape (Corner, 1999) and reflects cultural references drawn from literary criticism, popular culture, fiction, media and art. It explores the relationship between the physical and mental landscape, challenging the limitations of landscape approached predominantly as physical land in the design process. The course raises awareness *through landscape* of 'unseen' processes, for example spatial and temporal flow and the role of cultural image and media representation in constructing our contemporary perception and conceptions of landscape (such as the impact of virtual land-scapes and hyper-surface on the terms used within contemporary architecture).

The 'Conceptions of Land-scape' course aims to increase knowledge of the subject of landscape and to develop a range of concepts relating to landscape which can be utilised in future design projects. It also aims to engage the student critically with the process of investigation and research through the use of a range of media which explore characteristics of landscape. Project work and the recording of the research process are presented in a book/document for final assessment and articulate the student's personal definition of landscape. The course aims to promote the communication of ideas through group discussion.

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Each new project is introduced with a slideshow which presents different approaches to exploring landscape and mixed media examples – such as aerial photography and the image. Group activities explore the project brief and students develop the group work through their own self-directed project. Tutorials support the development of projects and ideas and identify supporting research resources for individual students. Informal group discussion at the start of each session provides a positive learning environment, reflecting on each week's progress. The first half of the course is structured with set briefs and group project work and a specific approach to each session through story, text, map, collage and image.

Story-telling as a teaching technique

'The story-teller takes what he tells from experience – his own or that of others. And he in turns makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale'

Walter Benjamin (Bauman, 1986, p.2)

The use of 'story-telling' as a teaching technique developed from an interest in the dialectic relationship of land-scape and story. Landscapes tell us stories ('story' stemming from the Latin word 'historia') through physical witness, marks, patterns and signs. We tell stories about [our experience of] landscape, imbuing landscapes with myths and meaning. Journeys, both real and metaphorical through place and time, relate our body experience to narrative, as described in the 'Heart of Darkness' (Conrad, 1981). The 'reading' of landscapes as texts (Barthes, 1989) and the eidetic image (Corner, 1999), the 'environmental image' (Lynch, 1977), the song line as a mnemonic litany (Shepherd, 1997) and the 'psycho-geography' of the Situationists (Sadler, 1998) reflect on this relationship. Rather than send students to a place to analyse the landscape, the rich experience of landscape vivid with meaning in the individual's memory becomes a field stretching between the physical and the mental landscape.

By recording the story of a once visited [real] landscape (going back to childhood in some cases) through text onto paper, the initial story can be analysed into key concepts and elements that can be developed to define landscape. The student can re-visit the experience from a number of perspectives gained from investigation through different media representation of the same land-scape. By transferring the narrative from text to other visual media, the narrative develops new meanings and invites new interpretations – for example spatial, textural qualities, relationships and intensities.

The story also enables others to form pictures through projection into the oral narrative and interpretation of visual representation. Thus the experiences of landscape becomes shared through written text, oral narrative and other media (such as collage) until the original experience of landscape through story-telling has become both research technique and research material.

Context

Landscape holds within it a wide range of subjects and this case study is applicable to built environment, architecture and art and design courses. The case study focuses on the learning and teaching methodologies adopted within the ten week course 'Conceptions of Land-scape', Extensions Study, Undergraduate Level 2, within the Faculty of Arts and Architecture at the University of Brighton. The course is offered as an 'options module' and has to be relevant to a wide range of students studying art, design and architecture and as an opportunity to work beyond their normal course material. For the tutor it is an opportunity to develop an area of pedagogic and subject specific research outside of the studio.

'Land-scape' is purposely hyphenated to distinguish the theoretical basis of the course from the traditional approach to landscape as land. The 'Conceptions of Land-scape' course positions 'land-scape' as a subject with a conceptual ambiguity that can be investigated through the individual experience and approach of the student. The course also aims to explore the relationships between disciplines such as art and architecture using the concept of landscape and what it can be or mean, to describe, inform and visualise different ideas. The student is visually constructing a landscape of ideas, re-locating ideas within different contexts or sites of representation to create new 'texts' to tell their story, much as 'Invisible Cities' (Calvino, 1997).

The student learns that landscape as an ambiguous term reflects a wide range of theoretical and disciplinary approaches. The subjective experience of the student is re-positioned through the investigative process, project work and research through the use of visual and academic references. By exploring landscape from a position of subjective experience, students become aware that landscape is diverse and can be contested as a cultural, political and collective process.

Relating Teaching Strategy to Subject

This case study describes a strategy of relating pedagogy to subject character and theoretical approach. The course aims to encourage students to work with the processes, relationships and phenomenology within landscape. The challenge with teaching landscape is its complexity and the wide range of ideas held within the term. How can such a wide-ranging subject be covered in a short course? How can students visualise conceptual and abstract ideas beyond a traditional landscape proposal? How can the course enable students to examine and re-define their conceptions of landscape and provide a set of ideas that can be transferred into the student's own disciplines? The teaching strategy identifies five key attributes of landscape which reflects both the subject and addresses these issues:

Subjective: primarily our understanding of landscape is through an individual's subjective perception, underpinning any theoretical or academic perspective. To gain an insight into landscape is to gain an insight into multiplicity and the variety of positions or viewpoints that are valid in understanding a complex subject. In recognition of the value of the subjective, the key methodology is the student's investigation, de-construction and construction of their individual definition of landscape. The individual student is sited within a group context

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where individuals share their insights. In effect the position of 'the other' and the multiple perspective of the group create a learning environment where students learn from each others' investigations.

Experience: the pre-existing knowledge and experience of the student provides the 'raw' material for understanding landscape. It also reflects the position that landscape is a product of the sensory, physical realm and of the imagination, dreams and the unconscious. Representations and associations of landscape reach and trigger a personal response. The students use their experience as the initial 'data' for investigation. Each student writes stories of memories or journeys, which are then de-constructed and analysed for key concepts. These experiences and elements are shared with the group to provide a range of interpretations of landscape.

Trans-disciplinary: this is a key concept, both in reflecting the nature of landscape and in reflecting the nature of the student group. In order to avoid approaching landscape through specific disciplinary confines and tropes, the responses of the students are used to focus the course. The premise of the course to investigate 'land-scape' as a contemporary term beyond physical land, re-locates the subject with an openness to abstraction and re-definition. It acts as a means to understand landscape's role in culture, environment, built environment and design and art. The students themselves are from 3D/sculpture/critical theory/photography and interior architecture courses, so the nature of the group structure draws landscape ideas from and across a variety of disciplinary approaches.

Relationships: the relationship between the subjective experience and the idea of land-scape and its representation are a key part of the course. Set individual projects ask students to represent their experience [the story] visually as a 'story-scape', primarily through using media as a technique to investigate their ideas, rather than to present the idea for an audience. Group projects ask students to discuss their material and construct interpretations of their representations of landscape. The interconnectivity of landscape is reflected in the ideas held within the group and the shared and individual interpretation which explore [cultural] language and frames of reference.

Frameworks: or contexts for ideas and their representations on landscape are constructed through setting mixed media projects. 'Mixed media' uses different but specific practical techniques of representation – such as collage, to investigate a concept. Different methodologies applied to the same set of information or ideas results in different output; the media frameworks challenge the student to reflect on the elements within their story from different perspectives, through the use of different interrogative methodologies. Different frameworks [disciplinary or otherwise] affect how we understand landscape. By restricting projects to a single media or technique each time, the student is able to re-interpret their experience by framing it in a different context. This helps make evident the relationship between vehicle and idea and also emphasises the different ways that landscape can be understood.

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Learning and Teaching Methodology

The students filled out 'Reflection Sheets' at the end of each teaching session for the first five weeks of the course. These forms ask students to record and reflect on their learning process, identifying learning outcomes and simply 'what they got out' of each activity within the session. This helped identify which teaching methods were the most effective for the students and identified difficulties. Rather than use these sheets to record the outcomes of the teaching activities, it would more effective if they were used at the completion of each project, related to media rather than 'activity' differences.

Prioritising the students' subjective position enables them to learn through evaluating their own experience and that of their peers. It also allows the tutor to learn from the students and respond flexibly to a range of ideas whilst facilitating techniques for their development. Situated learning and experiential learning (Kolb, 1984) form the basis for project-based learning. Inquiry based learning ["what is land-scape?"] is cemented through reflection-in-action (Schon, 1983) or action learning; the discursive group projects. Through establishing group work as a shared learning space, the students are exposed to a wide range of ideas, experiences, interpretations and representations.

Investigation through process, rather than design for solution requires the student to actively reflect and analyse by situating their own experience as research data. This instigates the development of a hypothesis ["land-scape is ..."] and a deep learning as students critically analyse the new ideas developing from the project work (see Clews, 2003 for a discussion on deep learning and the design process). By asking students to reflect on different means of representation as a tool, students have to take a position on the relationship between methodology, outcome and meaning, rather than presenting an idea without the context of its development. At the end of the course a presentation and critical reflection of project work records the student's position on, or definition of landscape and learning process.

Evaluation

Formative and summative student feedback through questionnaire and discussion was essential in evaluating the success of the teaching strategy. The assessment process also revealed those areas where students experienced difficulty. The reflection sheets were used as part of the feedback, revealing the outcomes and learning process of the group activities. The difference between self-reflection forms and feedback forms on teaching methods and course content should be more clearly distinguished to students and can be developed further to encourage self-assessment. Peer review and self/critical reflection was also vital in establishing what was and wasn't working in the course.

The students generally started the course with different levels of perception on the subject of landscape, evident through their initial definitions of 'land-scape'. This developed through the projects and was evident in the ideas and the final definitions at the end of the course. The majority of students reported that developing explorations about landscape through their story was helpful and that the group activities and the mixed media projects helped them to work with the ideas of landscape. Most stated that the inter-disciplinary nature of the group

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helped explore different experiences, perceptions and ways of talking about ideas. Most students did however state that tutorials were more helpful than the group work. This is thought to be due to more directed teaching support which can clarify areas of confusion and address specific difficulties.

Representation: the main challenge of working with a multi-disciplinary group using mixed media is that students have different degrees of competence in working outside of their discipline and varying level of technical proficiency. The course did not aim to teach techniques of visualising ideas but is based on the willingness of students to experiment in unfamiliar territory. For example, one of the set projects involves mapping the story. This does not involve a familiar graphical technique but depends on the student attempting to find their own visual language in describing 'non-visual' concepts from their story, such as intensity of experience. Here the student should consider *how* to represent their story, and more importantly, *what* they are trying to represent. A student pointed out at the end of the course that he usually spent the whole of a course on one piece of work trying to refine his ideas through one media and that by doing this through several projects he could not refine the representation of his idea. Although a number of initial projects follow prescribed media in an aim to place the group on a similar experimental ground, all students did opt to continue to work with media that was outside of their disciplinary norm when given the choice.

Presentation: The focus on experimenting with techniques to develop ideas rather than represent them led to confusion about presentation. Few students perceived the recording of the process of investigation and development as valuable and thus did not present projects as part of a resolved and integrated research process. This may reflect disciplinary approaches to process presentation. In some disciplines the final piece is public and assessed, but the 'working-out' process is private and assigned to the student's sketch book. In architecture the design process and development work is presented as the context of the final project and the concept of the portfolio as a story is familiar.

The 'Conceptions of Land-scape' course has been altered to emphasise the 'book' as a narrative on landscape; the final 'book' is the final project, the 'story-scape', rather than setting an additional piece of work at the end of the course. The set projects act as a kind of infrastructure or 'chapter' and the research in-between becomes the development of the story-line. Presentation can be addressed through clarifying that the role of narrative requires the integration of research and project work and an agreement on presentation can be reached through tutorial discussion on the format of the 'book'.

Surface Learning: Some students tended towards surface learning approaches by *representing* an idea rather than using media techniques to critically reflect on and investigate new ideas through engaging with the outcomes. This reflects the level of students' understanding of research through practice based projects. The process is dependent on the student's motivation and degree of self-directed learning, towards finding their own solution to an open-ended brief. This also depends on the degree to which students engage with group activities and understand the outcomes. There is a variance in

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the student's ability to abstract conceptual ideas through simple devices and the degree to which students respond to a situation intuitively or intellectually.

Reproduction

If teaching prioritises the experience of the student in the learning process, it values the subjective perspective of the individual as a learning tool, an initial position which can be developed into a theoretical or academic position. This approach encourages critical reflection and investigation to develop from primary material rich with meaning, feelings and associations, which can be explored from different perspectives. This pedagogic technique is applicable to any discipline and encourages different approaches and input to a subject area by recognising and utilising students' prior knowledge and experience. In relation to built environment subjects the learning and teaching strategy described enables students to develop and focus their understanding and investigation of a subject, prior to undertaking the design proposal/brief stage.

Small group structure: is essential in establishing a safe, positive and responsive learning environment, suitable for exploring and sharing subjective experience. The small number of students [max.15] means that the group has an intimate knowledge of each other's experiences [stories] and can trace their development into abstract and concrete ideas and theories. Casual discussion at the beginning of each session on any landscape related issues during the week often produced more material for exploration than the more structured and specific group activities. Large groups can be divided into smaller working groups, the most important element being the group's disciplinary composition.

Multi-disciplinary group: offers an exposure to multiplicity in terms of approach, techniques and perception and also allows the student to reflect on their discipline's approach from a different position. This situation coupled with the learning and teaching strategy enables a wide range of material, ideas and techniques to be covered. The use of 'story telling' enables a rich territory for students to investigate and transcends disciplinary boundaries. Difference [individual or discipline] enhances the benefits of group learning.

Process not product: an open-ended brief allows students to fully explore their position, prioritising the learning process rather than the production of an object-orientated solution. The use of mixed media enables students to understand the relationship between methodology, representation and idea as research, reflection and outcome. Re-working the same set of ideas [story] in specific and different contexts enables students to refine the relationship between image and subject. Experimenting with different techniques asks students to think differently. Mastering the technique is not the definitive factor of success.

Subject Responsiveness: designing the learning and teaching methodology in response to subject nature creates a strategy which reflects a specific position or statement on the approach to the subject. It enables an alignment of teaching aims and learning outcomes and transparently connects how the student is learning with what they are learning, promoting a deep learning approach

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Assessment: is against the learning outcomes centred on evidence of investigation and definition of the characteristics of landscape through mixed media, reflection and documentation. The learning process is assessed by how the students engage with the process and integrate and develop their research through the project work. The final document or book presents accumulated work through out the course and no piece had more 'value' in terms of assessment than any other.

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