



Research-based SuperStudios: Reflecting professional praxis

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The Challenge

Few would deny that architecture students are entering the profession at a challenging time. Concerns around the climate imperative, Covid, wellbeing and competency have the potential to arrest the exuberance of early professional life and anticipated opportunities for young architecture graduates.

As an art college graduate of architecture, I value the art-based heritage of the subject and the creative ambition this generates. However, having also worked in the construction industry, I recognise the demands on a subject which needs to be succinctly translated and communicated.



Professional studies students

“What students learn about themselves and their work is largely influenced by how they learn”

Architectural education is often undertaken in isolation from other parts of the construction sector, which can give rise to a sense of exclusiveness as well as make it difficult for students to perceive their role as part of the wider industry. It is therefore important for students to reflect on the realities of previous short-comings of the profession, as well as explore other stakeholder's perceptions of them, evaluate lessons learnt (if any) before coming to an individual 'position' about their place in the world. This requires a research-based approach.

‘What’ students learn about themselves and their work is largely influenced by ‘how’ they learn. Historically, architectural education has been taught through studio teaching. The studio is the critical and creative hub which develops a student's critical thinking and ability to process and apply information in a considered way.

Traditionally, studios are taught through a level segregated curricular in which different year groups are taught separately with an over-emphasis on competition and the individual project been valued over cooperation. This is a rare condition in practice and particularly within the modern construction industry where a range of disciplines work in close proximity to evaluate information together and form a collective view. For this reason, there is a sense that the system of segregated learning may not be fully conducive to the development of future architects and could, in some ways, be contrary to the highly collaborative nature of architectural practice.

SuperStudios - Our approach to professional learning

At Ulster University we have developed and implemented a fully vertical studio pedagogy, the SuperStudios, which is a research-based teaching approach comprising multi-year groups (Year 1 to masters) across 7 studios. Students of mixed age and skill level are taught together under the direction of a Studio Lead and supporting practitioner.

The approach promotes collaboration and collective ambition towards similar and convergent goals. It holds the potential to be an empowering learning experience nerved by the constant nearness of supportive peers and tutors. It develops an environment which nurtures student's cognitive thinking in developing the professional skills to analyse, peer-review and disseminate information.



MArch students preparing for cross-SuperStudio reviews

“At the centre of our students’ professional learning is the SuperStudios; building practice skills from Year 1”.

Similar to architectural practice, life in the vertical studio consists of day-to-day teamwork and decision-making which engenders responsibility. This leads to an increase in self-management

by the students, a skill which is best learnt in a praxis-focused context, in which students are tasked with managing projects, at their ability level, within specific timeframes. Skills which are vital in defining our graduates.

Aligning professional learning with industry

The SuperStudios are enhanced, or ‘scaffolded’, by research-based professional studies modules, taught from 2nd year, which use novel active-learning pedagogies to embed professional understanding and skills in the students. These are aligned to the Architecture Research Group - Praxis-Based Research Cluster. Assessment approaches used include active participation in live construction projects, where students engage with real-time site activities to evaluate and report on project progress; reflective analysis of current professional issues such as the Grenfell Fire and Covid design planning. Scenario-based NEC3 workshops, with PhD students from the School of the Built Environment, to risk assess and re-negotiate contract terms.



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A year-out student in practice

The opening of our new Greater Belfast Development campus, has enabled our students to have access to world class technology and built environment research expertise in fire safety, asset management, environmental services and the Centre for Sustainable Technologies.

We value the excellent support of our local architects and practitioners who are core to our student's professional development and collaborators on our PhD projects and research grants. These relationships are nurtured through our annual ‘Practice Networking Event’, where we invite local practitioners to meet our students as part of a ‘speed-dating’ experience, and also through the RSUA Professional Insights Programme (PIPS) where our students gain valuable work experience with local practitioners, in conjunction with fellow QUB students.

Our students are in a privileged position. It is important to find the sweet spot where fresh minds, engaged in architectural design, are informed as to how to use these insights wisely to develop their professional competencies. They need to



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The Practice Networking Event

respect the disciplines they'll work alongside but also to know the value they bring to the ‘room’; to facilitate these relationships, to engage across differences, to listen, to be a master of persuasion as well as agent provocateur.

The journey for a professional education

On reflection, we are all on a journey – both staff and students. The research-based SuperStudios are at the centre of that journey and of our student's professional education. This is where professional studies begin and should ultimately be evidenced through skills of collaboration, negotiation, decision-making, time management and programming.



SuperStudios comprise Y1 to Masters students

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As a School we will continue to reflect, assess and enhance our approach to professional studies and develop the studios to inform our Part 3 provision, part-time apprenticeships and international opportunities to further develop the architects of the future. ○

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