

# Facing global change: Strengthening lifelong learning in interior design education

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Interior Design education needs to evolve to keep up with continuous global change. This topic is explored through an emerging Department of Interior Design at Curtin University. The department is addressing these issues in the 4 year Bachelor of Interior Design program being developed for 1997 (replacing the current 3 year program).

The design world is going through a major transition, brought about by shifts in the world; electronic communication, deregulation, global economics, and environmental crisis. These changes affect the function and requirements of building interiors, highlighting the need for flexibility.

Due to these continual changes, the need for developing lifelong learning skills in education are paramount in order to lead, or at least to survive, a demanding and continually changing marketplace. Response to these changes must occur within education and the profession.

This case study will explore the above issues. We illustrate how life long learning skills are developed through an International design competition.

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## Introduction

Curtin University as with most universities in Australia, have in recent years become increasingly concerned with issues of quality and accountability especially as they relate to teaching and learning (Australia Higher Education Council, 1992). What has come to be known as 'lifelong learning' has become a key area of concern within this arena. The University has expended considerable energy and resources in developing Mission and Vision statements and writing a strategic plan.

Curtin adopted a strategic plan for teaching and learning for implementation between 1994-96. The second of five objectives within the plan deal with fostering lifelong learning skills defined as follows (Curtin 1994: 3).

'Objective 2 -To foster self directed learning

Benchmarks relate to measures of students' capacity and perceptions of their capacity to:

- discover, develop and apply their own strengths and capabilities;
- set goals for their own learning;
- work independently towards the achievement of learning goals;
- share responsibility for monitoring and evaluating their own learning;

- become skilled in accessing and using a variety of knowledge sources and information systems;
- value and prepare them for lifelong learning'

This case study discusses why this area is important to the profession of Interior Design, and the rapidly changing world it practises in. We illustrate how the department of Interior Design introduced it within an international design competition. We talk about how this is influencing the development of our department and the programs we run.

## **Lifelong learning overview**

'Thriving, not merely surviving, in [a situation] where change is a constant and ever-present challenge - not an occasional, disruptive occurrence - is the most obvious sign of our lifelong learner. Not only do they possess the skills and knowledge to operate effectively and efficiently in this environment, but also have the creativity, intuition, and motivation to view this challenging environment as a vehicle for their own self-improvement. Our lifelong learner stands out from those who have similar skills and knowledge, and even the desire to learn, because of the ability to strategically manage self learning.

### *An inquiring mind*

- love of learning;
- a sense of curiosity and question asking; a critical spirit;
- comprehension - monitoring and self evaluation;

### *Helicopter vision*

- a sense of interconnectedness of fields;
- an awareness of how knowledge is created in at least one field of study, and an
- understanding of the methodological and substantive limitations of that field;
- breadth of vision;

### *Information literacy*

- knowledge of major current resources available in at least one field of study;
- ability to frame researchable questions in at least one field of study;
- ability to locate, evaluate,
- manage and use information in a range of contexts,
- ability to retrieve information using a variety of media;
- ability to decode information in a variety of forms: written, statistical, graphs, charts, diagrams and tables;
- critical evaluation of information;

### *A sense of personal agency*

- a positive concept of oneself as capable and autonomous;
- self-organisation skills (time management, goal setting etc);

### *A repertoire of learning skills*

- knowledge of one's own strengths, weaknesses and preferred learning style;
- range of strategies for learning whatever context one finds one self in: and
- an understanding of the differences between surface and deep level learning.'

(Candy 1994:43-44)

## **The background**

### **Life long learning is inherent in interior design**

Lifelong learning skills are inherent in the role of an interior designer. Every new project brings with it new challenges. It may be as simple as designing for a company in an area of business the designer has not previously dealt with, or as complex as designing for future requirements of a company, anticipating future needs and future developments within that particular field of business.

The design world is going through a major transition, brought about by shifts in the world; electronic communication, deregulation, global economics, and environmental crisis. These changes affect the function and requirements of building interiors, high-lighting the need for flexibility.

Due to these continual changes, the need for developing lifelong learning skills in education are paramount in order to lead, or at least to survive, a demanding and continually changing marketplace. Response to these changes must occur within education and the profession. "I think the universities have got a lot to answer for, and I think there's a need for continuing professional education. Here we are in charge of so much money with so much expectation and yet we're not in any way reviewed. I think education should be an ongoing process, rather than learning by default within a practice" says Melbourne principal of Carr-DCMI designers. (Carr 1996:102-104)

Students who graduate without the necessary life long learning skills that will see them beyond industrial changes could suffer a short term employment life.

### **What is an interior designer anyway?**

"An Interior Designer is a creative person who develops ideas into objects and environments for other people to use or interact with. The act of designing is a complex combination of art and science. Interior design is involved with

creating or modifying interior environments, including the structure, the life-support systems, the furnishings, and the equipment. In addition, the interior designer must deal with the experiences, needs, and personalities of the users within. Working with human behaviour, lighting, materials, colour, and accessories, the interior designer plans and organises interior spaces to serve specific needs." (Kilmer 1992:8-9)

The majority of Interior Design professionals work in either an Interior Design practice or other allied fields of Interior Design. Their roles may be varied or singular, but always requires their cooperation within a design team. Their skills to communicate (both verbally and visually), to research, challenge and explore design themes, and to document these into a cohesive drawing package are essential for a successful Interior Design Firm. Although most graduates may commence their professional lives within a design practice, many branch out into other associated disciplinary roles such as; project management, facilitators, documenters, furniture designers, sales management, marketing, or choose the path of education.

### **Interior design project types**

Interior designer's work in a variety of areas all of which have their individual requirements. Every project is unique, with specific requirements that may never be duplicated by a similar company or similar situation. Examples of the type of projects that may be undertaken by an Interior Designer are as follows:

- Commercial office fitouts for Insurance, Legal, Accountancy, Stockbroking, and a variety of other companies.
- Hospitality - hotels, restaurants, bars etc.,
- Institutional - banks, hospitals, schools etc.
- Retail - shopping centres, shops, hotels; public areas, etc.
- Residential - large scale domestic, Townhouses, Apartments etc

### **The role of a professional interior designer**

- To analyse the client's needs, goals, and safety requirements;
- To integrate findings with knowledge of interior design;
- To formulate preliminary design concepts that are appropriate, functional, and aesthetic;
- To develop and present final design recommendations through appropriate presentation media;
- To prepare working drawings and specifications for interior construction, materials, finishes, space planning, lighting, furnishings, fixtures, and equipment;
- To collaborate with professional consultants in the technical areas of mechanical, fire, hydraulics, electrical structural and other relevant specialised consultancies as required for regulatory approvals;
- To prepare and administer tenders and contract documents as the client's agent;
- To instil client confidence. (Kilmer, R. & Kilmer, O. 1992:8-9)

## **Case study**

This case study will illustrate a particular project that deals with world changes, and how students applied problem solving skills to anticipate future scenarios. The success and rewards of this project establish the beginnings of a lifelong learner.

Interior design students in 2nd and 3rd year of their 3 year Bachelor of Applied Science (Interior Design) at Curtin University were asked to work together in teams on an international competition project. The design brief of this project is as follows:

### **Nagoya Competition Brief**

#### **Interiors: The Next Wave**

"As the next century draws near, the world is experiencing significant political, ideological, economic, and cultural changes. Society's present standards and ideals are evolving and adapting to meet those changes. The social climate in which the world of interior design has its being cannot be free from such trends. People are no longer interested only in functions, forms and productions but also in our global environment. Positive values are shifting from those of materialism to those consistent to harmony with nature."

Given the mood of the times, what is your 'NEXT WAVE'?

#### **Objectives relative to life long learning**

The design staff saw this international competition as an excellent opportunity to encourage students to develop life long learning skills through the following objectives:

1. To develop teamwork, leadership and organisational skills
2. To encourage students to explore and challenge preconceived ideals
3. To investigate the future direction of design
4. To research information on global environmental sustainability
5. To develop through vertical learning

When students work within a group, they are quick to realise that the only way the group can produce a successful project is by selecting and identifying the following:- a leader with decision making and organisational skills; individual skills that can contribute to the groups objectives; meeting agreed deadlines; and the ability to clearly communicate a point of view. This approach is not dissimilar to actual design practices. Most graduates will find themselves in a position where they will be expected to be an active team member, where their drawings are included in an overall building package, where the communication and sharing of their ideas is credited to a project and ultimately to the design firm, not to the individual.

Design Teams with a mix of 2nd and 3rd year students were formed to introduce students moving from the first year foundation program into the 2nd year Interior Design program. This speeded up the process of learning by exposure to students work from a higher year. This mix allowed 2nd year students to quickly gain an understanding of the standard of work required, current presentation techniques, and a level of questioning and problem solving already developed by the 3rd year students. It also placed the third year students in a position of responsibility for their group as leaders, organisers and facilitators. The 3rd year students found they were challenged in all areas of their design approach by the 2nd year students, thus encouraging them to argue and substantiate their design views.

When students are offered an open ended brief, allowing them to explore possible future scenarios for design directions, their ability to resource information is put to the test. Although they are given guidance by their tutors - throughout the extent of the project, this method of learning is possibly the most powerful, as it exposes students to a realm of possibilities of knowledge within a range of various mediums. More importantly, it challenges them to focus beyond a comfortable and familiar framework, by thinking to the future, they are forced to focus globally.

## **Process**

The competition ran initially over 5 weeks. Tutors met the students twice a week in studio. With student input, the tutors developed a program of completion, with milestones along the way. If a team ran into blocks, we would arrange special meetings and brainstorm with them on alternate approaches, to help them move ahead.

At one crucial time, where a number of teams had not progressed their ideas much further than the previous session, tutors had the teams switch projects. These teams then developed the project further based on their understanding of the brief and concepts proposed. This proved to be a major breakthrough. It illustrated to students the value of peer tutoring and how to use brainstorming techniques.

The final entry to Nagoya was 5 slides shown simultaneously with 150 word text read to the judging panel. A week before the submission to the tutors, rough slides were taken of their work and displayed to students in the same manner as the final judging. Students and staff participated in critiquing the presentations.

On final submission day the students had to do the actual presentation. Five slides on screen and enact their description. .... they had come a long way from the mock-up five days prior, but, however, staff and students agreed, it had not gone far enough.

Discussion followed of ways to polish for final entry. It was decided collectively that it was worth pursuing further. Another week was put into fine tuning ..... what a difference a week makes.

'We have noticed that those practices which most clearly enhance life long learning - self direction; peer mentoring; experiential and real world learning; problem based learning...' (Candy 1994:157) are present in this process.

The following outline summarises the process relevant to development of life long learning skills over a 6 week period.

Lifelong learning skills	Timing	Activity
Information literacy Experiential and real world learning	Week 1	Research, Brainstorming, Program Development
Helicopter vision: breadth of vision	Week 2	Ideation development, peer and staff critiques
A sense of personal agency: peer mentoring	Week 3	Refinements and further development, Exchange Exercise - peer team suggest alternate directions
Peer Mentoring	Week 4	Final development, presentation
	Week 5	Submission of entries, review, extension
Self Direction	Week 6	Representation, final submissions and assessment
Experiential and real world learning	Week 12	Team placed in finalist, asked to provide second submission
Information Literacy	Weeks 13-18	In-depth material and detail research, detail development, hiring of model maker, redefinition, refinement and re-design, second submission
	1 month later	Honourable mention, publication, display at international conference.

## Outcomes

### Winners!!!!..... and student pride

- Out of the five groups who competed in the Nagoya international competition, which consisted of 400 initial entries, one group was shortlisted to a field of 33 finalists. The pride in both the winners and fellow students in realising they could compete successfully at an international level was a boost to moral. This builds back to 'the inquiring mind', and 'a sense of personal agency'; increasing the love of learning and their positive concept of themselves, their colleagues and the program.

### National and International acknowledgment of quality

- Final entries were of a very high quality and became the bench mark for successive student work within the department.

### **High learning curve achieved from teamwork**

- Through the structure of the learning environment with teamwork and vertical integration of studio's students came to learn a 'repertoire of learning skills'. They were forced to discuss their own, and other team members strengths and weaknesses through delegation and organisation of tasks. They learned new skills from their colleagues. They explored areas none of them had ventured in before, but as a team found the courage and energy to explore. Junior students were exposed to senior students and senior students were forced into a teaching and leading mode. "Working on this project was a very good experience. Learning to work with other people, delegating tasks to get the most out of each other, and pooling together our individual talents towards a common goal." Talia Teoh, team member says of working on the project. (Lommerse & D'Scarlett, 1995)

### **Focus on the future**

- The students are well versed in what the profession does currently. Having them explore future possibilities made them aware of the need for continual learning. As their concepts for the future were dramatically different from present day life, they were able to recognise that the skills and knowledge required in the future would also be radically different from their current perspectives.

### **Information literacy**

- The project achieved the exposure to resources available for information gathering, the process gave them the steps by which to decipher, analyse and rank useful information.

### **Conclusions - what have we learned?**

"I know I cannot teach anything, I can only provide an environment in which he [she] can learn." (Carl Rodgers)

- There is a growing sense that the department can offer a service to the community through continuing education to the profession.
- Probably the most important conclusion we came to was that research skills need to be introduced much earlier in the program, at the undergraduate level. It is the key to our future profession.
- Higher and more dramatic learning curve is achieved through teamwork participation
- Students develop a greater camaraderie and supportive network following teamwork projects. This increases their confidence, and they therefore develop further the desire to learn more



- Offering students the opportunity to select their own topics and teamwork versus individual project work lets them develop preferred learning styles, and increases repertoire of learning skills

Competition briefs set outside the University, open to participants both nationally and internationally, gave 'real world' exposure and deadlines. Time management and goal setting are vital in life long learning. In establishing set deadlines due to competition entry requirements, students found they were better organised than previous projects.

**A year later....** the department has set out to make this learning environment for competition entry a regular part of the curriculum. We wait with bated breath to see the outcome of this round of entries. We have introduced research methods early in the course into a newly written 4 year degree that begins in 1997. We are currently piloting peer assessment early into the program.

*Life goes on and continues to evolve and we the tutors continue on our cycle of life long learning.*

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Nancy Spanbroek is a Lecturer for the Department of Interior Design, Curtin University, WA. Since her commencement in 1992, Nancy has been instrumental in developing new programs for the current course, and has been active in structuring the new Bachelor of Interior Design 4 year degree program due to commence in 1997.

Nancy has 10 years professional experience in London and Melbourne. She was an associate director of Geyer Design (Melbourne), and senior designer for David Davies Associates (London), both award winning Interior Design practices. Nancy participated in the marketing and management of the firms. She lead teams of designers and technical staff in her areas of specialty which included retail and large scale corporate office design, and has had her design work published in design journals both nationally and internationally.

Nancy has a Dip.A Int Des from RMIT, Melbourne, 1982. She is currently completing a Master of Arts (Design) at Curtin University. With her background in design practice and current experience in design education, she elected to research the current status of the Interior Design profession in Australia. What future directions it should take in order to maintain its position within the marketplace and how education can influence this direction.

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Marina Lommerse is Senior Lecturer and Head, Department of Interior Design within the School of Architecture, Construction and Planning at Curtin University in Perth. Since taking on the Interior design Department at Curtin, she has lead the department staff and students in making significant changes to the program resulting in a course focused on an International standard in design education.

Her background in International practise and design education( and involvement in North American design registration) will bring to focus where her experience and research tells her the connections are for the future between education, practice, and registration.

Marina has a Bachelor of Interior Design from the University of Manitoba (Canada ) and 16 years of professional experience in Interior Design. In 1985 she established a 15 person branch for an International Design Firm. She managed and marketed this office until 1992. During this time, she was involved with the strategic planning of the overall firm with offices in Toronto, New York and Calgary. She researched the design management area and worked with human resource and management consultants to implement management and project /profit control systems. In 1992-93, she spent six months in England implementing these systems and training staff in its newly set up London Branch.

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