

Re-Conceptualizing the Role of Tutors in Research-Based Pedagogy: The Tutor(s) as the Curriculum

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INTRODUCTION

The paper presents readers with an effort to explore and to better understand the educators' task in conditions of uncertainty and high complexity on the occasion of a postgraduate urban design studio redesign. The case study examined here illustrates how rethinking the studio's content, objectives and layout gradually led to the re-conceptualization of the tutors' own involvement in the learning process.

Course curriculum was devised as an open and evolving network of the tutors' own resources and design research practices and those employed by their affiliated researchers from within or outside the setting of the academy. All were chosen for their value in reading or managing urban phenomena. The mosaic consisted of different individual research and design practices that are problem-focused and context-specific communicated directly to students by the very people responsible for their conception and development. Learners were required to investigate the instrumentality of these practices according to their own personal pursuits; to make their own networks of connections, and were even encouraged to create their own personal schemata of design research.

The second major shift of the rethink lay in recognizing learner autonomy and diversity, thus establishing a new operational framework for the two to prosper. An amalgam of interconnected learning spaces provided the conditions necessary for all these networks to co-exist and interact. The paper describes the different aspects of the tutors' involvement and contributions in the design and implementation of this model, as they assumed a number of roles, but most importantly, as they became learners themselves. It also brings about the critical role of the tutors' hunch in both designing and managing a design studio's learning experience.

SETTING THE PRE-NARRATIVE I: CHOOSING THE AREA OF INVESTIGATION

The studio redesign frames the city as a multiplicity, an entity that is in the process of becoming and where "the world is not all in, it is in the making¹." Hence, the study of urban phenomena becomes the study of relations of the city agents; the *assemblage* of its complex and heterogeneous elements². The tutors' choice of the area the students would be required to investigate thus became a critical one; for it would have to embody that uncertainty and challenge students to unfold its complexity.

For the course examined here, students were asked to work in Eleonas, an area with close vicinity to the Athens city center. The choice was anything but random; Eleonas is an enclaved³ piece of land, locked in by express motorways and railway tracks. Once an agricultural territory, it became intensively industrialized during the 1950's. When the large companies set out for the periphery some three decades later, Eleonas was gradually abandoned. The lack of a clear state plan regulation for its redevelopment along with a weak administrative scheme (Eleonas jurisdiction is shared amongst five Municipalities) has led to its further decay.

Eleonas is suspended among the conflicting interests of its stakeholders: for the producers⁴ it is an opportunity for profit and there



Figure 1. Eleonas eerie scenery of dusty streets; waste and abandoned buildings (image above) has become the base of the scavengers' Sundays' open market (image below).

have been numerous times when private investors sought to do business in the area; for the state, the pending status of Eleonas provides an ideal place to accommodate a series of uses like the refugee camp, the first ever Athenian mosque and the newly legislated crematorium that would be hard allocating in other parts of the city without encountering some public resistance; in the meantime, numerous marginal social groups have settled in the area using the empty lots for a series of informal uses such as the scrap trade, or the scavengers' market (Figure 1).

What used to be one of the greenest parts of the Athenian metropolis is now facing pollution, segregation and crime. Its introvert character discourages people from visiting the place, so there is little or no understanding at all on its current condition. Needless to say that in the four years the course has run only a handful of students had ever been in Eleonas prior to joining the studio. The area was an uncharted territory for most of them.

The choice of Eleonas as the field of inquiry was one of the first manifestations of the tutors' hunch and it was essential for supporting the studio's original premise. But how could students even begin to decipher Eleonas complex spatial and social landscape, let alone propose possible strategies for intervention? How could tutors enable students to unravel its current realities and its future potential? If indeed the current educational task is "enabling students to prosper in an uncertain world," as Barnett⁵ suggests what does that task actually entail?

SETTING THE PRE-NARRATIVE II: PEDAGOGICAL PRINCIPLES

One of the key drives behind the studio redesign originated from the

ever growing importance of research in design education and practice⁶ as a means of connecting education to practice and also expanding the knowledge base⁷. The aim was to create a research-based pedagogical scheme with an emphasis on processes and problems⁸ where tutors' own experiences are strongly integrated into the learning activities and where learners become researchers themselves⁹. This is why the first major shift in reconstructing the urban design studio lay in perceiving content as an aggregate of different methodologies selected by means of their instrumentality in reading and managing urban phenomena. These methodologies -both analytical and experiential- stemmed from the tutors' own practice experience and their research interests. They were also connected with several doctoral research projects and/or individual design and research approaches from practitioners, tutors had collaborated with in the past. The methodologies included: space syntax; algorithmic thinking; expanded cinema practices as well as the study of bottom up social or artistic movements, to name a few. The researchers/practitioners were invited to participate in the course; to present their research and design tools and to argue the benefits of their use.

Another aspiration for the studio curriculum redesign was to encourage learners to explore the space in between what is well known and defined through other ways of knowing¹⁰. Such activities promote criticality and creativity, but are neither necessarily architectural nor formal; instead, they constitute alternate, informal ways of understanding complex environments and making meaning. This position also marks a shift towards a more transdisciplinary understanding of the educational process, one that blends scientific knowledge with cultural empathy¹¹ advocating for innovative and context-specific approaches to the design praxis for understanding the present world¹². In this framework, a series of in-situ workshops were organized in collaboration with artists engaged in the embodied experience of the place: a choreographer indulged students in silent walks; a sound artist helped students decipher the aural landscape of Eleonas; an actor guided the students as a group in a performative walk, while another researcher engaged students in a data harvesting exercise where their bodily movement was monitored and measured by a smart phone application (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Images from the workshops implemented in Eleonas.

Another major challenge - also related to the scale of intervention - was to direct design processes toward the handling of people and natural resources and not just design's morphological or material aspects; form was abandoned as the first principle of design success "in favor of the exploration of alternative ways of addressing social, emotional and political ends¹³." The idea was to draw students away from the form and toward architecture's fundamental purpose "in helping people create themselves in line with an evolving vision of who they want to be¹⁴." Therefore a number of guests were invited to contribute to the studio developing discourse by sharing their diverse perspectives: a professor working with commons; a life-long learning representative; the deputy mayor on the refugee crisis as well as a number of local activists that were somehow connected with the area of Eleonas.

In fact, the new curriculum was founded upon the idea of multiple knowledges¹⁵; once applied, the different methodologies and approaches included in the curriculum could lead to contradictory or conflicting perspectives. The elusiveness of a single valid design solution challenged learners to attempt their own interpretations, according to their diverse backgrounds and their own networks of relations. This principle aligns to both constructivist theories, where knowledge is perceived as a social construct, as well as the more recent connectivist views placing knowledge construction in the individual's personal recognition of patterns between networks¹⁶. With time, curriculum grew to integrate the students' own design research approaches. As the studio was repeated four times over a period of four years, student work became an indispensable part of the content offering additional insights on Eleonas as well as multiple new ways of managing its complexity.

What the graph in Figure 3 visualizes is the networked character of the curriculum: orange dots represent the design research tools and the researchers that were invited to participate in the studio; red dots represent the invited guests; blue dots signal the methodologies used in the workshops, while the yellow dots stand for the student projects that were developed through the years and ultimately integrated in the studio corpus as additional resources.

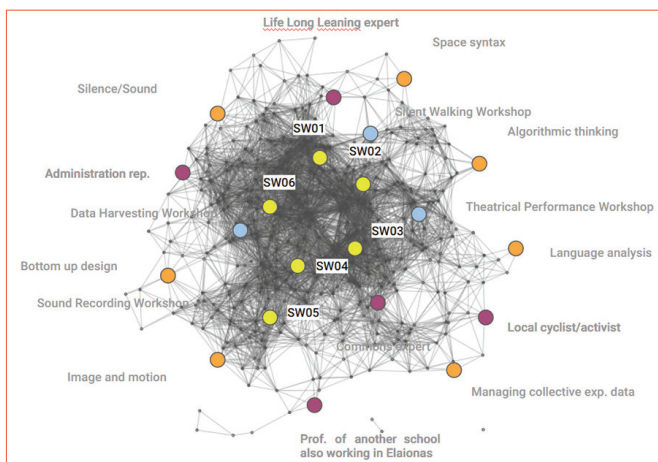


Figure 3. Graph visualizes the networked character of the curriculum

SETTING THE PRE-NARRATIVE III: OPERATIONAL MODEL

Devising the curriculum as a network of tutors' connections, and assigning learners with the responsibility of traversing those networks to make their own meaning, gradually led to the reconfiguration of the studio's operational model as well. A structural scheme was needed that would hold all these elements mentioned earlier together, while at the same time allowing students to pursue their own objectives.

Pedagogical principles were originally translated into a list of properties that was later further enriched by the desired operational imperatives that drew from blended and networked learning practices for their capacity: to distribute knowledge creation not in specific locations but in connections¹⁷; to connect learning to the rest of life and what people actually do¹⁸; to encourage learning based in experiential and collective processes and therefore integrate the concerns of the broader society¹⁹ and finally, for their capacity to integrate both formal and informal learning. The list, among others, includes agency; openness; collaboration and immersion. Interestingly, many overlap (Figure 4). This set of properties was subsequently diffused into learning environments through the use of a series of different applications. The more important the property, the more it was supported through these applications.

The graph in Figure 4 represents an abstract configuration of how the studio content and articulation was put together and can be used as an aid in designing a course. The central column (the list of properties) is supplied by either ends: one can start by setting the course goals or by experimenting with the learning methodologies available. The graph serves as a tool for transforming the course properties into educational practices and vice versa, while allowing different tutors the freedom to pursue their own personal educational aspirations. The list is open as well as both of its ends.

Studio activities in the postgraduate urban design studio examined here were eventually distributed in three different learning environments, both formal and informal: online, in class and in situ. Apart from the in-situ workshops and the usual practices held in class such as group discussions; revisions and student presentations, a set of online applications was employed to facilitate exchange and interaction: an online MOOC-like learning platform; individual student blogs; social media like Facebook and Messenger along with more specific online software related to the in-situ workshops such as Depthmap; OpenStreetMap and Echoes.xyz²⁰.

Meanwhile, the physical and virtual spaces mediated through these environments were intertwined in a synergetic, networked mode that involved extensive exchange and interaction between the diverse contexts in which learners participate²¹, while allowing them -among others- to individuate a learning network; and to emphasize technology as well as people²². Most importantly, the new setting allowed for the redistribution of knowledge creation, making everyone involved complicit in the process of learning. Like the tutors, students were also perceived as networks; they too had to display their existing connections as well as their newly formed ones.

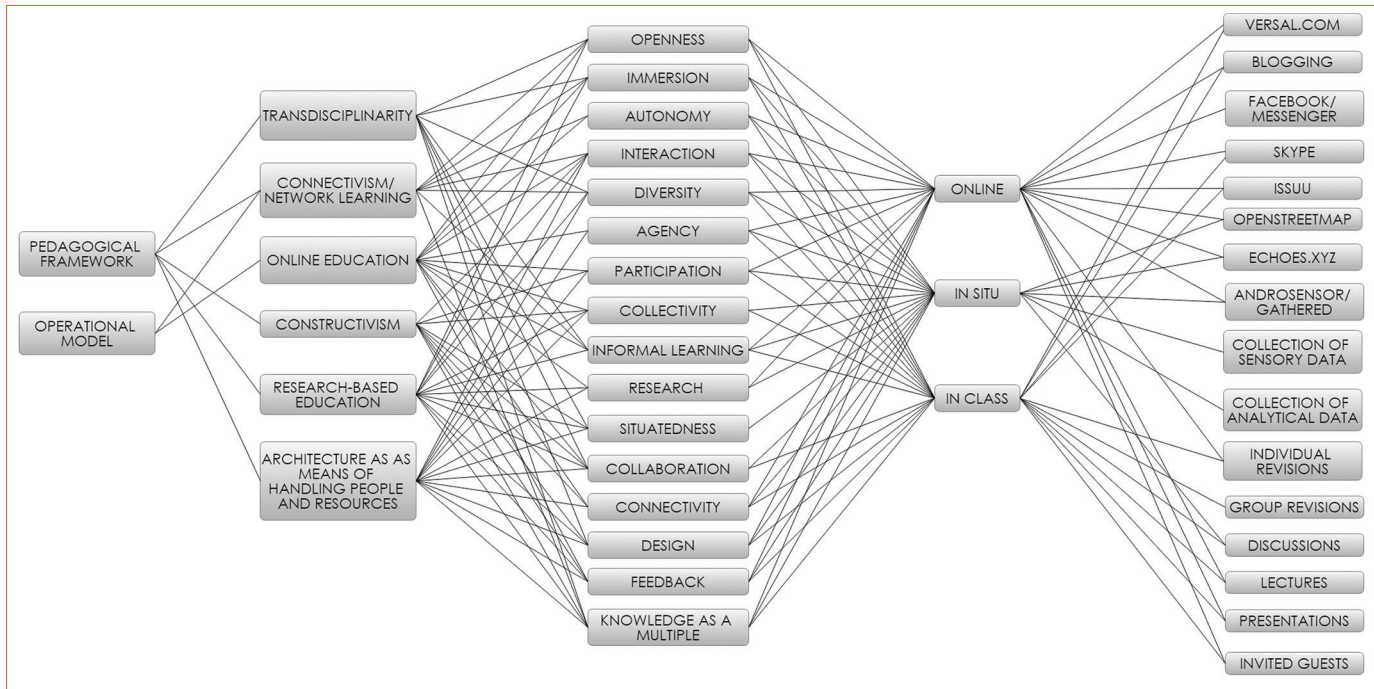


Figure 4. Graph showing the articulation of the studio in terms of its pedagogical and operational objectives

RUNNING THE COURSE

Due to the studio layout's open character there was no way of knowing from the beginning how the students would choose to navigate the course or engage with the people and the resources involved in it. Therefore tutors needed to supervise the process closely from the beginning and to constantly support everyone involved.

In fact, tutors' own entanglement during the studio run was immense: besides the regular in-class meetings, they persistently monitored activity in all three environments; they regularly intervened by adding or retracting resources and they kept readjusting the various components of the studio layout according to student feedback, even in real time. This required the systematic coordination of the material and operational framework in order to accommodate all needs, a time-consuming endeavor that required dedication and effort.

Tutors' direct communication with the students also remained constant either in-class or online. The course transcended the fixed schedule of the usual studio duration: there was a continuous engagement with the studio's ongoing activities for both parties through blogging. Tutors also interacted with learners on various occasions through online messaging especially around the time of interim submissions or open presentations of student work to provide with feedback and/or additional guidelines.

DISCUSSION

Online learning pedagogy manifested in blended or networked practices has determined numerous new roles for the tutors: they can be administrators, modelers or curators²³; information fillers, facilitators or change agents²⁴; and, for some, even community leaders²⁵. It is not

a matter of either/or; tutors may at some point assume one or the other. However, while most -if not all- of the abovementioned qualities can potentially represent the tutors' range of roles in research-based design pedagogy as well, the latter ascribes tutors with some very important additional attributes.

The tutors responsible for this studio acted primarily as designers; both in planning the studio layout and the overall learning experience, but mostly in considering it as a set of processes that reproduces the sometimes chaotic character of the design praxis. This attitude resists directing the course towards predetermined learning outcomes; instead, it encourages the learners to decide for themselves what course to follow. The tutor-designer binary here is represented by a shift from "teaching what one knows", to "illustrating how one thinks" or even "identifying who one is". The studio becomes more than content transmission, it is a process of "modulating identification across multiple locations of accountability²⁶" where decisions are political, driven by the individuals' personal hierarchies and values. This also explains why tutors set the agenda of the dominant themes from early on in the course: in this case, social relevance; natural resources; and the sensory and the emotional experience of the urban domain. It is like the tutors' network provided the fabric against which the value and relevance of student work would be measured.

This is a model where there is little or no control over how the learners will engage with the resources. Therefore, the tutors are called upon to supervise a series of eclectic student projects that vary in theme and scale. This has two major implications for them; one is that they need to develop strong listening skills for "the sharpening of reciprocity²⁷." If learning is situated in the process of making connections, then it becomes essential for tutors to lend an attentive ear

to the learners in order to support them creatively. The second is that tutors need to be open to the other(s). If tutors are indeed a sum of interconnected parts as their fluctuating networked nature presented in this paper implies, they too should be able to adjust and adapt to otherness. The constant confrontation with multiple perspectives challenges tutors' network hierarchies and places them in the learner section of the classroom, together with their students.

CONCLUSIONS

Design studio may have proven to endure time, however, tutors' part in designing and conducting a studio is all but fixed. The issues raised by contemporary societies and the pressing spatial and social realities that drive today's cities pose a constant need for the re-evaluation of educational practices. Architectural and urban design study curricula will never cease to undergo continuous transformations just like the cities -their main corpus of investigation- have had in the past decades. In addition, online learning practices challenge the limits of the traditional educational models. The courses we are planning now can involve features that extend the physical time and space limits of the classroom. Most importantly, our understanding of the learning process has gradually shifted from an instruction based model to an environment of open human interaction where both tutors and students participate in a mutual exchange of information and personalized views of the world²⁸.

In this light, there is no limit to what tutors can do in rethinking their teaching practices: the way they choose to approach design research or how they engage their students in it. What is important is that the studio does not solely depend on the tutors' own skills and preferences or even obsessions, but also -and perhaps even more importantly- in their capacity to acknowledge the value of other practices and to integrate them in their courses. Opening up to otherness and the potential they encompass -even when that is based solely on a hunch- becomes ultimately both the means and the end to the learning process and probably one of the most valuable skills for a designer.

Notes

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