

# A Beginner's Mind

**PROCEEDINGS  
21st National Conference  
on the Beginning Design Student**

**Stephen Temple, editor**

**Conference held at the  
College of Architecture  
The University of Texas at San Antonio  
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Situating Beginnings  
Questioning Representation  
Alternative Educations  
Abstractions and Conceptions  
Developing Beginnings  
Pedagogical Constructions  
Primary Contexts  
Informing Beginnings  
Educational Pedagogies  
Analog / Digital Beginnings  
Curriculum and Continuity  
Interdisciplinary Curricula  
Beginnings  
Design / Build  
Cultural Pluralities  
Contentions  
Revisions  
Projections

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# Inserting a Design Culture into a Multicultural Environment

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## Introduction

Unlike most other disciplines across the college curriculum, design introduces its students to a way of thinking and learning very different from what they experienced in their previous education. This difference is even more pronounced for students entering design foundations at the American University of Sharjah (AUS) in the United Arab Emirates. The school provides a co-educational, multicultural environment unlike most other universities in the Middle East and very different than what most students have experienced in their secondary education. While many of these students share many traits and values with students from Western cultures, there are fundamental cultural differences that challenge the way these students engage their design education. This paper examines methods of instruction that build upon the established culture and examine learning impediments that these students face at the beginning of their design education. Some of these impediments are culturally based while others come from a student's prior experience with a model of education that stresses memorization and recall rather than critical thinking skills. This paper also utilizes an AUS foundations student survey that was administered to assess how this diverse student body engages this transition into a design culture.

## Background

The United Arab Emirates is different than most countries in the Middle East in that roughly 80% of its population of four million is expatriates. <sup>1</sup> This expatriate population is made up of people from all over the world who have moved to the Emirates to work in various industries. Most countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) rely on expatriate labor to sustain economic development but the UAE is perhaps the most culturally diverse country of the region. Students in the foundations program at AUS come from 21 different countries. The largest single population, that of UAE nationals, makes up only 15 percent of the total student population in the foundations program. GCC nationals make up 29 percent of the total foundations student population and 66 percent are of Arab decent. The rest are from Asia, Africa, Europe and North America. The one-year foundations program at AUS includes students who will major in architecture, interior design, visual communication, multimedia design and design management.

Many universities in the GCC segregate men and women. The government-funded universities are generally for nationals only so the student populations tend to be very homogenous. One primary aspect common to both the educational system in the Middle East and Eastern cultures is the emphasis on community. This has both positive and negative outcomes in Western design education. Independent thought is often discouraged and conformity is praised. The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) "Arab Human Development report:2003" stated that some researchers have argued that the curricula taught in Arab countries seem to encourage submission, obedience, subordination and compliance, rather than free critical thinking. In many cases, the contents of these curricula do not stimulate students to criticize political or social axioms. Instead, they smother their independent tendencies and creativity (Munir Bashour, background paper for AHDR 2). <sup>2</sup>

Many students entering AUS have little experience thinking for themselves. They are used to parents making decisions for them and teachers directing them as to what to do. Research conducted through the Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research notes “Education in the GCC countries is criticized for its emphasis on routine learning and memorization, for its high attrition and for repeaters’ rates which have reached 31 percent in some secondary schools. Schools are accused of graduating more and more low achievers who are functionally illiterate and lack a minimum threshold of competence.”<sup>3</sup> The methods of instruction students are exposed to also limit the types of learning experiences many of the students have. The UNDP report notes that “there are various means for conveying information: lectures, seminars, workshops, collaborative work, laboratory work and many others. In Arab countries, however, lectures seem to dominate. Students can do little but memorize, recite and perfect rote learning. The most widely used instruments are schoolbooks, notes, sheets or summaries. Communication in education is didactic, supported by set books containing indisputable texts in which knowledge is objectified so as to hold incontestable facts, and by an examination process that only tests memorization and factual recall.”<sup>4</sup> At the end of the first semester of study at AUS, only 20 percent of the foundations students surveyed stated that their secondary education prepared them for their foundations courses.

There have been significant efforts in the last two decades to increase the quality of education in the region. Private universities like the American University of Sharjah have been established to provide an education equivalent to what one would typically find in the West. Because of the growing globalization of the economy, English has been the preferred language of instruction, which has posed a problem for many students who lack the English language skills needed to effectively engage in a teaching environment that often involves complex issues and theories. Many students must spend extra time devoted to reading to reach a level of comprehension adequate to pass the course.

Social and family obligations are a priority in regional cultures and often compete with study and work time. Forty-seven percent of foundations students at AUS say that family obligations conflict with study and studio work time. Far too often the family structure has created an environment that also limits students ability to think for themselves. The UNDP report states “Studies indicate that the most common style of child rearing within the Arab family is the authoritarian accompanied by the over-protective. This adversely affects children’s independence, self-confidence and social efficiency, and leads to an increase in passive attitudes and the deterioration of decision-making skills, not only with respect to behavior, but also to how the child thinks. For, starting in early childhood, the child becomes accustomed to suppressing her or his inquisitive and exploratory tendencies and sense of initiative (al-Sweigh, *in Arabic*, background paper for this report).”<sup>5</sup> Social time spent visiting and talking to friends is even more of an issue for foundation students at AUS, with as many as 70 percent saying that social time with friends conflicts with study and studio time.

### **Establishing a Design Culture**

The AIAS Studio Task Force report on *The Redesign of Studio Culture* has been instrumental in the examination of design culture at AUS. The report states, “To design a healthy studio culture, we have laid forth five essential values: optimism, respect, sharing, engagement, and innovation.”<sup>6</sup> These values are essential in a multicultural learning environment that aims to bridge Eastern ideals that focus on the collective and Western ideals that focus on the individual. The report goes on to say, “A challenging studio learning environment contains many aspects: relating knowledge to student experience and vision, a multiplicity of pedagogical and learning styles, a variety of student-faculty and student-student encounters, an ability to take risks, and an opportunity to share power to construct new knowledge and transform thinking.”<sup>7</sup> In a

multicultural environment, these aspects must address cultural and social issues in a way that allow all views to be heard and valued equally.

Creating an environment that promotes learning, social and intellectual development and positive engagement is the first step to establishing a healthy design culture. Thomas Cassidy reports in his essay on Arab education, "Practices based on the individual pursuit of rote learning and memorization must give way to practices that encourage teamwork, critical thinking and problem-solving; methods that assume that all people learn in similar ways must also give way to methods that understand that people often learn in very different ways."<sup>8</sup> It is critical that the design student understands the role they play in their own education. They must understand from the beginning that they are ultimately responsible for their own learning. This doesn't mean that educators no longer play an important role in shaping the student's future. It implies an engagement between faculty and student that allows for flexibility, openness and trust. The AIAS report talks about the problems associated with the establishment of a studio instructor as an authoritarian figure stating, "When a studio culture places an instructor in an unquestioned position of power, we believe that learning is compromised. Design instructors are leaders, critics and facilitators... In an environment where educators create master/student relationships, students are less likely to take risks, think critically, or communicate successfully with instructors."<sup>9</sup> Students need to feel empowered especially if they come from a background where their role within their own education has been passive. However, with this newly found freedom, students must also learn that they have responsibilities and that if they ignore their responsibilities that there will be consequences.

The foundations year is often difficult for students because they must transition to a new educational environment where the subject and manner of inquiry is different, and must adjust to a different work and study schedule. Students also have difficulty with the system of grades at AUS. Most students that come to AUS are used to being in the top 25 percent of their class, and were able to achieve that level of success by only studying a few hours in the afternoon. Immediately on entry to the foundations program at AUS, students find that to get above a C, they need to work evenings and weekends as well. Students have stated that while it was typical for them to get straight A's in high school, they are getting C's in many of their classes and it is hard for them to cope. Unfortunately, this has created an environment where grades seem to dominate the foundations student's agenda. Like in many schools in North America, acceptance to second-year is competitive, based on GPA and space availability. Sixty-five percent of foundations students at AUS stated that they were concerned they will not get into second year. Students also feel a great deal of pressure from their parents to make good grades. Fifty-six percent of students said that their parents would be upset if they got a C in any of their classes. The report of the AIAS Studio Culture Task Force comments on the pressure surrounding grades: "Grades reduce risk-taking, reinforce conformity and generally lead students to avoid challenging themselves in the studio."<sup>10</sup>

Because students spend a great deal of their time in each other's company working in the studio, they should be encouraged to engage each other as part of the learning process. Students seem to understand the value of working and studying with a diversity of other people. This type of engagement seems to be as relevant to the profession as it is to education. In describing the studio culture that was established at Umbra Ltd. in Toronto, Paul Rowan states, "Sustaining creativity requires a continuous infusion—not only of new ideas, but also new people."<sup>11</sup> The establishment of a design culture is a good way to connect academic and social experiences. If this happens in a studio space that is utilized by a diversity of people, learning through an unscripted engagement with others naturally follows. The value that is placed on social relations is also integrated into how design is taught. Small-scale critiques and collaborations allow students to "help each other." This plays into the strong sense of community prevalent among the cultures represented on campus. Rowan observes, "It is our consistent experience that creative

work thrives best in a collaborative environment.”<sup>12</sup> Communication is also encouraged between year levels as an informal mentoring system. Ninety-four percent of foundations students at AUS reported that they discussed their work with other foundations students, 63 percent reported doing so on a consistent basis, and 60 percent stated that they discuss their projects with upper-year level students. This collaborative atmosphere is also facilitated by the openness of the classrooms and the proximity of different majors to the foundations area. This arrangement encourages collaboration and interaction not only among students, but also among faculty.

The learning objectives of the foundations program must be balanced between objective skill-based learning outcomes and knowledge-based learning outcomes that deal with process, critical thinking and innovation. The establishment of a design culture must primarily evolve out of the pursuit of knowledge-based learning. The report of the AIAS Studio Culture Task Force, states, “If future architects are to perceive new opportunities as well as give them form, architectural education must depend less on skill-based learning and more on the dissemination of knowledge. The critical knowledge to be disseminated and assimilated is not all internal to the discipline.”<sup>13</sup> The establishment of this type of focus must be integrated into the very beginnings of a student’s education.

Students at AUS have an enormous amount of trouble managing their time because punctuality and deadlines have not been emphasized in their previous education. The AIAS report states, “Learning successful time management skills is essential. Students must truly understand the value of their time.”<sup>14</sup> This is addressed through both the teaching environment and types of projects given to foundations students. Projects that last through more than one class period are broken down into segments that allow students to gauge how and what they are to accomplish by the next class period. This tends to help students engage the project objectives better but unfortunately doesn’t help them to begin to learn time-management skills. One method used to confront this issue is to assign a time sensitive outline at the beginning of the project that the student must create/design as a means to plan their time to effectively complete the required work. This way, the student is ultimately responsible for planning and organizing his/her time. Because the time management outline is created by the student and not imposed by the instructor, a certain amount of flexibility is created, which allows students to plan for family obligations or other assignments that might compete with study and work time. Additional time management and study skills training are available through a study skills advisor dedicated to the school. This advisor primarily works with beginning design students who are struggling academically.

Most AUS students don’t have the confidence to make independent decisions at the start of their design education. The integration of projects that have some degree of experimentation builds confidence and encourages independent thought. This type of project is often characterized by having a defined set of objectives, but an undefined or vague outcome or the final “product.” This is often balanced against the necessity to create a structured process that allows for a focused investigation. Structure is important because it helps students deal with time management issues and keeps them focused on project objectives but it can be an impediment to the development of independent thinking. This has been confronted through a balanced structuring of the process and development stages of the design project that allow students to develop design intentions and variations on a theme that is personally unique. Critical thinking skills are integrated into exercises through simple analysis, process articulation and verbal communication of design intentions. Students use the design vocabulary and representation skills that they have learned to design the project around their own interests. This is important in that it nurtures student’s creativity and gives them some element of control. Rowan writes, “Creativity is often described as ‘making the familiar unfamiliar.’ Looking at things from a different perspective.”<sup>15</sup> The multicultural environment of the foundations studio at AUS certainly allows for

the examination of multiple perspectives but only if students are encouraged to express their personal views and experiences through their work.

In establishing a healthy design culture, students must be comfortable having their work critiqued and critiquing other student's work. After one semester of study, 89 percent of foundation students at AUS said they felt comfortable having their work critiqued but only 63 percent said they felt comfortable critiquing other student's work. Students need to understand the importance of the critique as a learning opportunity. Many students misunderstand the critique as a personal commentary on their abilities. Students that feel uncomfortable critiquing other students work often don't want to offend or say anything negative about that work as they fear it will create a hostile environment. Learning how to critique other students' work and the student's own work is an important learning objective that is too often left to the student to figure out on their own. If the critique is integrated into the design process and students are encouraged to participate throughout, the critique process becomes part of a larger discussion and avoids the particulars of individual critique that may be irrelevant to the group. Critiques that focus on the particular aspects of individual projects are perhaps more relevant to a one-on-one desk critique, which should be very different than a group critique. For either instance, the instructor has an obligation to teach students how to critique.

Lastly, students should understand that the work they are doing in foundations has value. It may involve basic design and drawing techniques, process and development, but its value is relevant to the design profession. At AUS the value of the work produced in foundations is reinforced through the display of the work in public areas of the architecture and design building. These shows are designed to encourage students who have produced something noteworthy and as a learning opportunity where exemplary work can be discussed on its merits. The foundations year ends with the Foundations Juried Exhibition, for which students submit up to three drawings, models or designs produced in one of their foundations classes. The show is competitive, generally accepting only about 30 percent of the submissions. The work is then exhibited in the main gallery and judged by three invited outside critics who choose four awards and honorable mentions. The entire faculty of the school selects to award the Faculty Choice Award and the department chairs and the dean choose special awards as well. This event is advertised all over campus and draws students and faculty from outside the school as well as the chancellor of the university and some local media.

## **Conclusion**

The establishment of a healthy design culture in any school of design is one of the first steps to ensure consistent academic quality and achievement. It is this context that is one of the most important learning objectives. The UNDP report states "Ultimately, the quality of education does not depend on the availability of resources or on quantitative factors, but on characteristics related to the organization of the educational process and the means of delivery and evaluation."

<sup>16</sup> Within a multicultural environment, the design culture has a unique ability to absorb cultural, social, political and religious differences in a way that promotes quality, innovation and respect for other points of view. The establishment of a positive collaborative atmosphere has the means to produce an environment that combines educational objectives, social opportunities and growth. If it is to be successful, students must be drawn to the design studio because it provides a type of learning that they are unable to achieve in isolation.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.uaeinteract.com/news/?ID=134>

<sup>2</sup> United Nations Development Program, *Arab Human Development Report 2003: Building a Knowledge Society*, United Nations Publications, 2003: 53.

<sup>3</sup> Hamad Al-Sulayti, "Education and Training in GCC Countries: Some Issues of Concern," *Education and the Arab World: Challenges for the Next Millennium*, The Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research, 1999: 272-273.

<sup>4</sup> United Nations Development Program, *Arab Human Development Report 2003: Building a Knowledge Society*: 54.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid: 51.

<sup>6</sup> AIAS Studio Culture Task Force, *The Redesign of Studio Culture*, The American Institute of Architecture Students, 2002: 19.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid: 16.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas J. Cassidy, Jr., "Education in the Arab States: Preparing to Compete in the Global Economy," [weforum.org/pdf/.../Reports/AWCR\\_2002\\_2003/Education.pdf](http://weforum.org/pdf/.../Reports/AWCR_2002_2003/Education.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> AIAS Studio Culture Task Force: 21.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid: 16.

<sup>11</sup> Paul Rowan, "Creativity and Education: Personal Reflections on Achieving Success by Working Outside the Box," *Education Canada*. Toronto: Fall 2003. vol.43, Iss. 4; pg. N/A.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid

<sup>13</sup> AIAS Studio Culture Task Force: 13.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid: 8.

<sup>15</sup> Paul Rowan: N/A.

<sup>16</sup> United Nations Development Program, *Arab Human Development Report 2003: Building a Knowledge Society*: 55.