Chapter 15
Identity Transformation through Collaboration: Narratives of ‘Becoming an Architect’

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ABSTRACT

Presenting narratives of three recent graduates of a U.S. Master of Architecture program, this study employs an interpretative-narrative approach to access and evoke the role that collaboration plays in the process of ‘becoming a design professional’. Whereas ontological learning has been recognized as fundamental to life-long learning and development, research has yet to explore themes of self-authorship in relation to collaborative design experiences. In representing authentic voices of learners, the research presented in this chapter contributes to a deeper understanding of the ways in which aspiring design professionals make sense of their transformation from academic to professional selves. This will ultimately inform how design educators value and structure team-based design projects by providing a more holistic understanding of the role such projects might play in shaping individuals’ identities.

More than in many other jobs, being a successful architect means not only knowing but being. (Stevens, 1999: p. 55)

INTRODUCTION

Educators, scholars, and professional bodies have long been concerned with the transition from school to work, from the standpoints of competency, socialization, and the public good (see Boyer & Mitgang, 1996; Merton, 1968; Tierney & Bensimon, 1996). This passage from disciplinary outsider to member is a critical period of meaning-making and introspection during which aspiring professionals are con-
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fronted with questions of who they are and who they wish to become (see Baxter Magolda, 2001; Case, 2013; Chickering, 1969). Sullivan (2012, p. 104) writes, “Professional education presents students with the knowledge, skills, and purpose of the field they seek to learn. It also frames how students relate the demands and possibilities of the profession to their developing sense of self and purpose.” Thus, professional education marks a period when students undergo marked changes to their ‘ways of being’ (see Barnett, 2000; Sandberg & Pinnington, 2009). Supporting and encouraging this process of transformation, which educational theorists call ‘ontological development’, is increasingly considered a primary aim of higher education across disciplines (see Barnett, 2000; 2004; Baxter Magolda, 2001; Dall’Alba & Barnacle, 2007; Hanson, 2014; Harrell-Levy & Kerpelman, 2010).

The potential ‘transfer of learning’ from academic to professional contexts is one of the most commonly touted benefits of collaboration in higher education (see Cuseo, 1996; Ettington & Camp, 2002). Ettington and Camp (2002) argue that students need to perceive the relevance of collaboration in order to transfer teamwork skills from the classroom to professional applications. Student perceptions toward collaboration is thus a chief concern for educators and professional bodies alike. As Gale, Martin, Martin, & Duffey (2014, p. 27) warn: “Negative attitudes toward collaborative learning could have a significant impact on the success of emerging professionals.” However, prior studies on this topic in design-based fields are not designed to examine how collaborative learning experiences contribute to ontological development within students’ broader life histories. Using primarily questionnaires, they tend to consider student attitudes only within the scope of specific courses, projects, or learning outcomes (see Byun, Kim, & Duffey, 2012; Gale et al., 2014; Hynes, 2015; Kim, LaFleur, & Schaeffer, 2008; Russ & Dickinson, 1999; Webb & Miller, 2006). The study presented in this chapter takes a holistic, phenomenological approach by exploring what role collaborative learning experiences play in wider narratives of self that constitute the process of ‘becoming a design professional.’ This follows Hanson’s (2014, p. 8) claim that,

*Any thorough study of how people change in college would seem to require an analysis of the narratives that students use to develop identities—a sense of what they were like before they started and how they became during the course of their education.*

In this ongoing study, recent graduates of a Master of Architecture (M.Arch) program based in the United States participated in a series of in-depth interviews that sought to situate graduate school experiences within personal life histories. Adopting an interpretative approach informed by interdisciplinary theories of ontological learning, student agency, and narrative identity, analysis procedures ultimately produced a series of passages evoking the transformative potential of designing in teams. Thus, results from this study suggest ways in which narrative reflections of collaborative learning experiences can prompt transformations of self-identity. This work builds upon scholars’ attempts to better understand and promote ontological development amongst undergraduates in liberal arts contexts using the concept of ‘self-authorship’ (see Barber, King, & Baxter Magolda, 2013; Baxter Magolda, 2001; Case, in press; Pizzolato, 2003; Torres & Hernandez, 2007). While further research is required to convincingly link collaborative learning to the development of self-authorship in aspiring design professionals, this project serves as a revealing graduate-level and professional case study and opens up a promising area for scholarship on design education.
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