Chapter III

The Music Room: Translating Curricula into Real-World Professional Experience

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Abstract

To explore the synergies of an integration of the conceptual and practice worlds, this chapter draws on part of an Australian Committee for University Teaching and Staff Development funded project for students of architecture and construction. Composing Architecture — The Music Room, involved 74 second-year students at an Australian university. The case study is used as an illustration of curriculum design, including assessment aimed at creating learning experiences that were purposeful, rich in their complexity, and mirrored the demands of a profession fostering development in a supportive environment. To support this aim the elements of the music room project were tested against proposed criteria for authentic learning. While recognising the differing views of scholars and challenging some claimed attributes, the case study indicates that, irrespective of discipline, there are some fundamental shared understandings of what an authentic learning environment entails.
A compelling challenge for tertiary educators is to respond meaningfully to pressures to provide curricula that translate readily into real-world professional experience. As Berge (2000) recognises, employers are putting a higher value than ever before on the ability of employees to solve more complex and ill-defined problems. A recent Australian government funded project of employability of skills for the future (McLeish, 2002) identified eight essential employability skills: communication, teamwork, problem solving, initiative and enterprise, planning and organising, self-awareness, and the ability to work with technology. Similarly, a U.S. study (Richens & McClain, 2000) found that 92.6% of 400 employers interviewed rated personal quality skills, interpersonal competencies and thinking skills as most important. Tertiary educators, especially those who are preparing for the professions, are rightfully concerned to ground their teaching as far as possible within real-world situations and to provide students with opportunities to acquire, practice and demonstrate such skills. The challenge is to find ways to do this effectively.

The term authentic in relation to learning experiences has been added to educational jargon because it resonates so convincingly with the notion that learning should be real and actual, as opposed to contrived and hypothetical (Challis & Langston, 2002). Traditionally, in much undergraduate teaching, and within the constraints of a normal semester’s program, there is a propensity for theory and content to be privileged. There is forceful and compelling literature on assessment that claims much current practice in the higher education sector encourages surface learning where the extrinsic motivation is to focus on disaggregated selected details of content rather than intrinsically to seek deep understanding through constructing knowledge (Ramsden, 1992). With a recognized paradigm shift in higher education, one from a focus on teaching to a focus on learning (Barr & Tagg, 1995), more educators are seeking opportunities to link theoretical and applied knowledge. With assessed tasks as a driver, they aim to engage students in learning activities that are worthwhile and meaningful and which will pose challenges that are demonstrably relevant to, and aligned with, those that will be faced in the profession. In this context, theoretical and applied knowledge (the conceptual and the practice worlds) are never regarded as mutually exclusive. Rather, their linking, with its anticipated consequential synergies, is seen as an essential component of the learning experience.

Research suggests that students learn best in the context of a compelling problem (Ewell, 1997) and this is certainly what students in the case study discussed below found. Although the discussion is restricted to one cohort of students observed closely by the author throughout the semester, the author has had opportunities over three years to work closely with the lecturer involved and with
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