Re-narrated stories: A reflection on narrative learning in a first-year design studio

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the implementation of narrative learning in first-year architectural design studios and how it can amplify the making, communicating and reflecting aspects of the study. In particular, this paper examines the estrangement technique, which enables an objective view of a story and its telling. The technique allows the students to detach an existing narrative from its context to be analysed, and then recontextualise it. We focus on the main studio project for the first-semester architecture and interior architecture students in Universitas Indonesia as the context of this study. This paper analyses their process, final outputs, and feedback to see the lesson learned from their perspective. The content analysis method is used to reveal the details on students’ inside process that leads to the final output. As a result of this study, we found that there are two main categories in systematically adapting existing narrative into a new form of representation; by transforming its story or its telling. In the end, estrangement technique provides the students with a way to retain some aspects of a narrative while playing with others, producing a fresh view on telling stories through enhancing their ambiguity and interaction between design author and their audience.

Keywords: Architectural studio, Estrangement, Narrative, Representation

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Introduction

Architectural practise today needs a transdisciplinary perspective more than ever, because “the practice of architecture is a set of external networks, and necessarily dependent” (Till 2009, 161). Transdisciplinary engagement is also so crucial to reimagining the world, as we know it rapidly changed, and many convention constraints are no longer relevant (Douglas 2014). Architectural education, as the root of the practice, needs to prepare its learner to this ever-changing world. The problem arises when the first-time learners in higher education try to dive in the architecture field. Many of them are coming from different prior education with a very distinct way of learning. Therefore, architecture educational institution has to recognise the potential disciplines that can help its students in practising architecture in their first exposure to architecture. Integration of other disciplines into the field is also beneficial to widen the student’s perspective while getting more depth to the subject (Yocom et al. 2012). One domain that is mentioned many times related to architecture is narrative. Recent discussions already inform narrative’s opportunities in architectural education; it might be applied in the studio exercises, workshops, or as a theoretical frame that construct the whole studio experiences (Alon-Mozes 2006; Hisarligil 2012; Nazidizaji et al. 2015; Thompson 2019; Troiani 2012). This paper attempts to amplify the transdisciplinary practice by particularly investigating the contribution of narrative structure and how it can be developed as
a design basis in architectural studios through estrangement.

The application of narrative structure as a design framework in architectural studios is in line with the challenge of architectural education itself: “to generate, develop, represent and execute spatial ideas” (Clear 2014). A narrative is the way stories are told, and these ways of telling are eventually used for structuring human experience (Abbott 2002; Bruner 1987), which are crucial in spatial practice. It highlights the importance of narrative on how we arrange and present the spatial ideas, not just the beginning and ending point. Learning the narrative also focuses on the design process rather than the output (Alon-Mozes 2006).

This paper presents the analysis of the studio works by discussing the significance of narrative learning in architectural design studios as a communication tool. It will also look at the theory of narrative framework concerning a studio learning culture. Then, it moves to the explanation of the Basic Design 1 course in Universitas Indonesia as the context of this study. We also cover the method that was used to analyse students’ works in discovering communication, creation, and reflection practice as three aspects that are enhanced through the narrative approach. The discussion progresses to key findings that demonstrate various perspectives in interpreting narrative text through the process of estrangement. Lastly, this article summarises the lesson learned from applying a narrative framework for first-year architectural students.

Method

The context of this study is the Basic Design 1 studio in the Department of Architecture, Universitas Indonesia. In particular, this paper will discuss the narrative-based unit in the main studio project. The unit was held in both Interior Architecture and international class of Architecture undergraduate programmes for the last three years. The learning objective of the study is to enable students to produce two and three-dimensional works as creative responses towards contexts by applying basic knowledge on visual art and design (Faculty of Engineering Universitas Indonesia 2018). This course is the studio for the first semester students in which they are introduced to the specific nature of architectural studios. That includes early exposure to create, communicate, and reflect attitude.

As a continuation of the previous project in the course, this task requires students’ critical thinking and contextual work through visual representation (Saginatari and Atmodiwirjo 2017). Notably, the unit’s goal is to communicate a design by applying composition and design principles while using narrative as a framework by any means. Students are encouraged to do the assignment in pairs. They were asked to produce a 2D, 3D, or even 4D work by including time in their design equation. As an introductory course, this project does not expect them to produce something that is particularly spatial as long as it visually represents students’ analytical thinking. This task challenges their collaboration, discussion, and negotiation skills as it promotes a different way of learning compared to what they had in high school. Besides, the assignment also hints on what skills they should hone to be ready in post-university life.

The programme ran for only ten meetings in a total of 5 weeks. Although each year has a different sub-theme, generally the sessions are divided into three stages; the beginning: a brief introduction to narrative via readings; the middle: analysis, where the student breakdowns any form of narratives of their choices and look at the potential of them; and finally the ending: where the design is developed based on their findings into making and presenting. Every week, the students are required to display their progress and discuss it with both tutor and friends. Aside from the content of the unit, its structure is a meta-narrative that is communicated to the students in the first unit meeting to map the whole story that they will experience. Closer to the analysis part, students are given the freedom to choose whatever narratives to be analysed. We want to highlight that using an existing narrative as a starting point is vital because of the limitation of time. It also “exemplifies its potential in a relatively easy way” (Alon-Mozes 2006, 36). This way, students can learn directly from established instances then interpret them into another narrative form.
Result and discussion

Represent and retelling in the undergraduate architectural design studio

A narrative framework can help students to understand studio culture in a more structured way. The introduction to the particular mode of learning in the first year is essential because the studio environment is entirely different from students’ previous education in high school. Back then, they passively accept knowledge from their teachers (Brown and Clark 2013) instead of constructing it. An architectural studio focuses on knowledge building, encouraging student reflective practice while working on similar tasks yet with different output/interpretation (Cennamo and Brandt 2012). While every architecture school has a particular way to conduct their studios, there is one bold line that connects all the dots. An architectural studio is about how one creates, communicates, and reflects.

Architecture students’ main tasks are to make architectural representation and compelling communication (Wahid and Atmodiwirjo 2018). Their design toward a specific brief should manifest in a material form (e.g. model, drawing, video) and delivered to the design perceiver (e.g. teacher, critique, prospective client, community, environment). Most of the time, after providing the ideas, the student receives feedback from their teacher and needs to work on design iteration through refinement in multiple perspectives. Because of the shared end goal, peer discussion also works in altering the design. It shows that the studio is “grounded in the systematic knowledge of the mutual relationship among design, the human environment, and social practice” (Brandt et al. 2013, 346). All things considered, the culture of the design studio might be described as a vital complex of material representation, social collaboration, creativity, emotionality and a tolerance for uncertainty – if not outright confusion – balanced with a faith that meaningful designs eventually will emerge (Wang 2010, 176). Thus, learning how to construct a narrative is significant to the studio to enhance students’ creation, communication, and reflection ability.

Understanding how the telling of a story is structured frames the way we think into an episodic, causal relationship between circumstances. It is unnecessarily chronological, but there are always correlations between scenes to make sense of it. Narratives also incorporate
temporality, a social context, complicating events, and an evaluative conclusion (McAlpine 2016). In the studio, raw materials or information could be translated into an edifying design framework through the engagement of narrative, that increases student’s comprehension on that subject (Graff and Clark 2019). Frequently, a story is told from several distinct points of view. It can be from multiple protagonists or even from the side of the antagonist. A narrative then enables designers to imagine different perspectives on the design process (Gerards and Bleeckere 2014). It informs that learning narrative in a studio setting enlighten the students to believe that there is more than one approach to a design scenario. The act of systematically constructing a story is also useful to drive a design in a step by step manner, whether it is linear or not.

A narrative is used by humans to make sense of the world through a series of events' mental composition. The telling part of these composed events is one thing that makes narrative a communication tool. Consequently, the way it is perceived is dependent on both the author and the readers. A narrative that is crafted carefully, clearly, by its author may be understood differently by different audiences with different existing experiences that made them perceive it that way. Stories are ambiguous; they can not only have one meaning and always open to interpretation (Bolton 2006). A thorough understanding of this feature of narrative can be applied in the first-year studio to improve students' communication skill. First-year students were coming from various backgrounds and had different communication modes. In this diverse setting, communication to achieve mutual understanding will be difficult, and narrative could provide context for knowledge concepts (Graff and Clark 2019). However, the ambiguity of stories might improve a design project's richness to some extent as well.

Like previously mentioned, reflective practice is a bold characteristic in the studio because of the design process’ nature. A project usually happens for a certain period of time with one goal to be addressed by design. The student, as the designer in his project, evaluates his works based on what he had done along the way the project is progressing (previous move) and also what he appreciates from the potentials they have created (Schön 1987). The action of narrating a self-story supports this reflective practice in which it requires introspection of what the teller has done, and what to do in the future (Leshem and Trafford 2006). Reflection and observation skills towards real-life tension are also a crucial aspect in creating a new story as well as design (Austin 2020).

To effectively tell a story, estrangement is a useful technique that is used to make distance and see things more objectively. In this article, we would not use the distinction of estrangement concept by Spiegel (2008). Instead, we take the Shklovsky’s definition of it as a narrative mechanism in which an expenditure of effort (Wall 2013) to render something that is familiar, unfamiliar. This mechanism can be applied in studio learning to take a more objective look at learning subjects. It could lead the students to scrutinise their subjects and not hastily jump to conclusions.

Through a subtle instruction to apply estrangement, the students succeeded in producing works with narrative structure as their design framework. The technique benefits them to explore the existing material without having to be entangled with the relation between a story and its particular narrative discourse. The narrative discourse can be seen as an armature of the story itself, in which it could be altered or defamiliarized through model making. Looking at their working process and the feedback they gave to the course, we could read how narrative enacts creating, communicating, and reflecting practices.

Adapted story and its discourse into a new representation of narrative

In developing the project’s output of 2D or 3D works, students made analyses, displays, and design prototypes. They were set to collaborate with their pair within a bigger group of people to let them discuss and argue. Based on the feedback form, the opportunity to collaborate is one thing that is mentioned the most by the students as a benefit of the unit system.

This environment became such a playground for testing their ideas, ways of thinking, and forms of practice while opening up the possibility to make many considerations (Brown and Clark 2013). It demonstrates creating and reflecting practice simultaneously. Furthermore, communication emerges in peer discussion and presentation. One of the students commented “I personally think that this was not just about the research itself, but at the same time …to practice delivering information through displays and presentation[s]” – MGA, 2017.
Estrangement technique was prominently perceivable in the analysis step of the project. The weekly presentation encourages the students to strip down their choice of narrative, distancing themselves with the end product of it. This inner process of defamiliarize the existing narrative shapes the project’ final form. Figure 2 shows how it is done; the discussion between students and the facilitator create many iterations of analysis that lead to the project output's fresh ideas.

We found that the final outputs fall into two main categories. The first one is the adaptation of an existing narrative’s structure to create new stories. Figure 3 corroborates this as the students learnt from graphic novels. They then expressed how space and time are warped in a graphic novel’s panels and how the gap between the panels perform the narrative itself. From there, the students created a new story, consists of six panels that can be read from any starting point.

The second grouping is the one that represents an existing story with different narrative discourses. For example, figure 4 is the result of students’ examination on every Donnie Darko’s narrative elements. It shows the connection between layers of music, characters’ gesture, and dialogue as a new representation of the movie.

Interestingly, another pair compiled many takes on the Little Red Riding Hood works of literature and analysed them to explain the similar yet non-identical stories. To match the direction of the course, they transform the old representation of text into painting. It ends as visual communication of link between events in the story that creates the branching narratives as shown in figure 5.
The two types of outputs demonstrate a process of narrative adaptation, either its story or the telling part. It also shows how an exploration of material expression could transfer the interiority of the narrative. By prototyping or making a mock-up, students explore the possibility to deliver a narrative that is distinct from its previous form. Figure 3, 4 and 5 convey the ambiguous aspect of stories. Being design works, they also open to different interpretation that enriches the meaning of the works.

Transaction of meanings through teller and readers interaction

Some of the students’ works demonstrate the importance of audiences in creating meanings for their design. When exhibited to the public, their works automatically asked anyone who approached them to make an interaction, enacting multiple interpretations of the story. Figure 6 illustrates one way to do it. Learning from the movie, La La Land, the pair let the viewer mix seemingly common elements like a dancer, carpet, train track, and a starry sky background into one scene to create a surreal atmosphere. A handful of images are also available so the audience can create their own story. The colour-coded slot in the wooden base has a mechanism in which people can only put one image at a time in an orderly fashion. This technique is deliberately applied to produce a sequence of having some ordinary images that gradually turn into a dreamlike scenery. The narrative is then created by the act of putting together out-of-place story elements.

On the other example, figure 7 shows a board game that is loosely based on a Korean drama plot. They examined its arc, personas, and the story world law to develop this work. Taking the form of a board game that can be played by two players, this work rigidly expresses the causal relationship between events. The main structure of the narrative is represented in the game instruction, whereas the story itself is constructed by playing the game. Therefore, multiple stories could be produced by a three-point interaction. Firstly, is the offered framework of the lore by the authors. The second and third points are the players as the game progressed through their choice of characters. We can see in this instance that both players are protagonists in their own view, implying the multiple perspectives approach to the design.
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From both examples, students learn that the meanings behind a design are constructed by the interaction of designer and users through the design works. The investigation of the existing narrative structure supports the students to understand more about how they could transfer the story of their design to its user. At the same time, it made them open to the chance that their message might be interpreted differently. At the end of the project, one of the students commented, “I tried to make something that [was] easily understood by others. Something that has meaning” - HIT, 2017.

Conclusion

Narrative knowledge indeed contributes to architectural education in helping the students generate, communicate, and reflect on their works. Estrangement, as one mechanism in the narrative, is useful in the studio to see things more objectively. It can be achieved by rendering something that is familiar, unfamiliar. The analysis of the students’ process and outputs from the Basic Design 1 studio’s main project indicates how a narrative framework and the technique was applied in analysing narrative instances and developing their design. Analyses, displays, and design prototypes done in collaboration demonstrate the simultaneous exercise of the three aspects of the studio that was mentioned.

The students are trained to think in the causal relationship between circumstances through examining a narrative structure. They also see how a design process can be approached and interpreted from various perspectives. The interaction between design authors and its perceivers co-creates the ambiguous meaning of the design narratives. It indulges the student in reflective practice that can improve their works. Furthermore, the project outputs inform us of the two categories of estrangement form. One is held on to the story, while the second adapt the representation form of a narrative to convey a new story. Both groups show that material expression and prototyping could transfer the interiority of a narrative from its previous media into some new, visual forms.

However, all of these findings are not intended to look at narrative knowledge as a holy grail that will make a design automatically better. As mentioned before, a narrative is essentially a communication tool. It helps students to articulate their design, deliver the purposed meaning of it yet open mind to the chance that that meaning will be shifted. But, just like all books in the world, we will judge them by the cover at first.

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Author(s) contribution

Arif Rahman Wahid contributed to the research concepts preparation, methodologies, investigations, data analysis, visualization, articles drafting and revisions.

Paramita Atmodiwrjo contribute to the research concepts preparation and literature reviews, data analysis, of article drafts preparation and validation.