Facilitating Engaged & Authentic Learning Through A Collaborative Online Platform

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Introduction

In this short article, I will share my experiences in setting up the ‘Asian Urban Epicenters’ website (www.asianurbanepicenters.com), a comprehensive collaborative online platform for sharing thoughts on Asian urbanism. The initiative stemmed from my own personal interest and desire to set up a platform to document, accumulate knowledge and share them with a wider community. I conceptualised and established this web-based platform in 2012 with the following objectives:

• to create a clear arena of debate on the role of Asian urban epicenters in the globalised world;
• to establish a network of collaboration among people interested in this subject both inside NUS and outside (individuals and institutions)¹; and
• to identify and accumulate the knowledge relevant to this field, such as practices and projects.

An online platform that fuels discussion and active learning

However, when I began incorporating the platform into my teaching, sporadically at the beginning, I quickly found out that it not only helped my students in terms of giving them the opportunity to develop their dissertation or design ideas and reflections, it was also an excellent online space for them to share their knowledge with external colleagues and other researchers in the field. Along the way, I discovered that this website has great potential not only as a research tool but as an excellent teaching (or rather ‘learning’) tool. This is because the platform enabled my students to move from being passive recipients of knowledge to becoming active content-generating participants imbued with a greater sense of ownership of their learning journeys in this subject area.

Following this discovery, in Academic Year 2012/13, I started to systematically incorporate the platform into the modules I teach at the Department of Architecture. These include Year 4 modules AR4101 and AR4102 “Design Studio” and AR4142 “Research Report”, as well as Year 5 modules such as AR5141 “Dissertation” and AR5103 “Architectural Design Thesis”. This online platform has attempted to open up discussions among the students and researchers who have been involved in the various teaching and research initiatives which I have started. It also aimed to help them actively discover, identify and explore the possibilities and potentials of major Asian cities to provide, in their respective global positions, visions of contemporary Asian urbanism, and to use this website to share their ideas with a wider online audience.

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Using the Platform to Maximise Learning Outcomes

Establishing an online platform as an educational and research tool for documentation and wider communication with the public capitalises on the potential of the open collaboration that the Internet can offer. This platform enables its users to do comparative studies of Asian cities from the ‘bottom-up’, and from a learner-centred perspective, they develop the capacity for accumulating knowledge and critical thinking.

The platform’s contents are generated by various authors, including students as well as researchers from NUS and around the world² who share similar interests (or different perspectives), based on various means of research and learning ranging from literature reviews to comparative study of real world urban conditions using case studies from different contexts which are gathered through documentation and communication.

The platform has since been used to maximise the interactive learning and teaching outcomes of these modules. The result has been an accumulation of knowledge through participation, collaboration and exploration by all the participants, which has been documented and developed further over the years and aims to go beyond the limit of space and time (classrooms and semesters). The goal is to ultimately grow the website into an adaptive, evolving platform for further research and education, and to use it to promote more independent and critical thinking through authentic and bottom-up learning.

In short, the platform has facilitated a different way of learning, where students are:

1. Learning beyond ‘space’ constraints (to promote learning beyond the boundaries of classrooms)
2. Learning beyond ‘time’ constraints (to promote learning beyond pre-defined timetables or semesters)
3. Acquiring a capacity for learning that accumulates authentic knowledge from the real world and ‘evolves over time’

The interactive and collaborative nature of the platform is able to facilitate the cultivation of self-directed and independent learning amongst students, critical skills in this complex and fast-changing society that we live in. More importantly, these are skills which students can acquire beyond the space and time constraints of a conventional learning environment.

Using the Online Platform to Promote Independent Learning

With this collaborative online platform, I have tried to challenge passive forms of education, where learners are not perceived to be active, engaged or reflective, through an authentic and engaged learning experience. According to Wheeler (2012),

“Authentic learning is related not only to the knowledge students receive, but also to the knowledge production they can themselves achieve. Such learning is not instant, nor can it be achieved over a brief time period… Complex and iterative learning of this kind takes a lifetime of study, and is always grounded in real world experience.” (Para. 2)

On the other hand, there is also the assertion that engaged learning “which is often used synonymously with active learning, meaningful learning…where learners take responsibility for their own learning…[enables learners to] actively develop thinking/learning strategies and formulate new ideas and understanding in conversations and work with others” (Hung, Cheah, Hu & Cheung, 2004).

Instead of being given the ‘answers’, with this platform, students were constantly encouraged to actively find their own answers to respond to real world situations, explore different perspectives and share them with their peers and other researchers. The effectiveness of this approach is supported by various literatures that argue that “in order for students to be able to investigate the learning environment from more than a single perspective, it is important to enable and encourage students to explore...

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different perspectives on the topics from various points of view” (e.g., Collins, Brown, & Newman, 1989; Honebein, Duffy, & Fishman, 1993; Spiro, Feltovich, Jacobson, & Coulson, 1991). The online platform has indeed played such a role, operating as a vehicle of learning by giving participants, both students and academic colleagues, the opportunity to share their narratives and stories with others and celebrate our differences.

Concluding Remarks

A key point I have learnt from developing this platform is this: once you have empowered your students by giving them a sense of ownership towards the knowledge they generate through an engaging learning process, it keeps them motivated to become voluntarily involved in their own learning journey throughout their lifetime. To my joy as a teacher, some of my former students who were involved in this study have continued contributing articles and providing comments to other authors through the website, even after their graduation. I believe this is the ultimate achievement of teaching, to nurture “independent, autonomous lifelong learners” (Wheeler, 2012) and the platform has assisted me in taking one step closer to this goal, not only as a teacher, but also as a learner myself along my own journey towards lifelong learning.

Endnotes

1. Currently the website has 137 members who are both within and beyond the NUS community. According to the latest statistics by Google Analytics, the website has 572 page views and 191 visits per week (as of June 2013). The visitors are from various countries around the world, such as Singapore, China, South Korea, Hong Kong, USA, the Netherlands, Australia, UK, India, Indonesia, Taiwan and many more.

2. I have received emails from field experts in Hong Kong, Shanghai, South Korea, UK, the Netherlands and many more, keen to explore collaborations and to make contributions to the platform. Articles have been published by an academic in South Korea and with contributions from design practitioners based in Taipei. Refer to the articles: ‘Fresh approaches to urban design in the metropolitan Seoul’ (Sep 9, 2012), ‘Urban regeneration in Barcelona and Seoul: Different approaches, similar consequences?’ (Mar 25, 2012) and ‘Tower Of Colony by Groundwork’ (Feb 13, 2013) at www.asianurbanepicenters.com.

About the Author

Dr Cho Im Sik teaches Year 4 and 5 architectural design studios and urban studies/research modules. She also supervises graduate dissertations/theses related to comparative studies of Asian cities with a focus on community design and urban public space planning. She is the concept initiator and editor-in-chief of ‘Asian Urban Epicenters’, a collaborative platform for sharing thoughts on Asian urbanism.
References


