

Jan Frohburg  
Fail better.

## The potential of assessment in education for reflective practice

*"How do you deal with students that are in danger of failing?"* This was one of the more memorable questions during my interview for a position at the University of Limerick. As lecturers we might share, and in fact we do to a surprisingly large extent, a tacit understanding of what qualifies as 'good work' – and what doesn't. At the same time it is difficult, to say the least, to impart to the students a sense of quality and the ability to judge. *"You tell them plainly and explain clearly where and why they went wrong, what they can do about it, and offer your support in the process,"* I replied, or something along those lines. The problem, of course, is to be clear about the 'rights' and 'wrongs' (and if they exist in the first place) and hence about the criteria we apply to student work, and how to make them explicit. – In the following, I will expand on concrete experiences in our emerging architecture programme at the University of Limerick and how we try to address this problem.

### **Design Studio as the place of reflective practice**

The School of Architecture at the University of Limerick (SAUL) uses design studio in teaching architecture, both as a learning environment and a technique of instruction (fig.1). Work in the design studio models architectural practice. Its very capacity for reflection sets practice apart from vocational training and laborious enterprise. Without reflection there would be no innovation and no evolution of ideas. Much of what we do in studio-based design education relates, consciously or not, to the paradigm of reflective practice.



1. Design Studio — SAUL architecture students and lecturers in "conversation with the materials of a situation" (photograph by the author).

Donald Schön (1985, p.6) described the ideal design studio as *"...an exemplar of education for artistry and problem-setting. Architectural studios are prototypes of individual and collective learning-by-doing under the guidance and criticism of master practitioners."* At SAUL we think of every design project as an exercise in problem-setting rather than problem-solving. Thus it is only apt to do this through design studio, and we use it for inquisitive conversation where we simultaneously interrogate site, brief and strategy together with our students, modelling the *"conversation with the materials of a situation"* (Schön, 1983, p.78). In our work, problem-based learning is interwoven with continuous feedback and assessment. Design is best understood through reflective practice – in response to the condition of Modernity with its increasing uncertainty, ambiguity, complexity and potential value-conflict. Design education aims at empowering students to operate in these circumstances, and design studio is the main instrument in delivering such design education.

### **The problem of assessing creative work**

But how does one evaluate results where an endeavour's outcome is, by its very nature and definition, open and uncertain? As we are often reminded, competencies that are key to design *"are simply not assessable by traditional methods. While it is perfectly possible to use traditional methods to measure recall of facts and information, it is not-at-all easy to use such methods to measure innovation, judgement, or personality"* (Race, 1993, Ten worries – and some suggestions, no. 3).