Introduction

In a profession that holds the power to create and modify the built environment, interior designers have an obligation and responsibility to meet the needs of the present without compromising the quality of life for future generations. A course offered in the fall semester of 2008, ID 670 Topic in Advanced Interior Design Theory: Sustainable Design and Interiors, was designed to help students develop a greater awareness of the impact of the built environment on the natural environment and the potential of the design professions to promote a more ecologically and socially responsible future. The course used reading, writing, and discussion to help students develop an understanding of sustainability from technological and cultural points of view. One of the expectations was that each student would develop a personal ethical position on issues related to sustainability that would influence his or her future as an interior designer.

Methodology

Student anticipation and reflection writings from this course were analyzed using the frameworks of critical reflection (Hatton & Smith, 1995) and transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1990). Seventeen students are participating in the research. For this preliminary analysis, writings from eight students were used. The data represent seventeen separate writing assignments, with 113 separate writing examples.

A Reflection Typology

Hatton and Smith’s (1995) typology outlines a progression toward critical thinking: descriptive, interpretive, reflective, and critical reflection. The typology begins with a descriptive (or non-reflexive) level and moves through increasingly complex levels. Writings chosen to illustrate how students were using this typology were selected to illuminate how students wrote about their reactions to their current world has and to dream up what life could be like. It needs to be realistic enough to work towards. We need people who are willing to think outside of the constraints our current world has and to dream up what life could be like. It needs to be realistic enough to work towards. The behavior has to change. Humans today are not always being responsive to the behavior of their ancestors. We think about behaviors of the past, the power of the present, and the capacity of the future to change.

Preliminary Results

Preliminary analysis of data shows the bulk of student writing samples falling in the categories of descriptive reflection (63%) and dialogic reflection (30%), as shown in Figure 1. Analysis also indicates that throughout the course, students were engaged in self-examination, critical questioning, and exploration of new options, which are all elements of critical reflection necessary for perspective transformation.

Examples of Student Perspectives

Stage 2: Self-examination

Thirty-five percent of the writing examples contained material coded for self-examination. In this stage, participants are questioning social and cultural assumptions about industrial consumerism, progress, and leisure. They discuss how they view industry, the economy, and the environment. The following is an example from Student B, which captures the student’s concern with the environment and the consequences of current consumerism.

I do not think that I will ever be a designer who is content in the meaningless pursuit of material wealth. I recognize that there is a personal satisfaction and love for material objects, but I question whether these objects should be considered a necessity. With the current level of consumerism, there is a major amount of waste that is produced. This waste has not been fully utilized and is not considered sustainable. As a designer, I question whether the pursuit of consumerism is necessary and whether it is truly beneficial. I believe that there is a need to reevaluate the current level of consumerism and consider the consequences of such a pursuit. I want to be a designer who is mindful of the environmental impact of their work and strives to create sustainable design solutions. (Student B)

Stage 3: Critical assessment of assumptions

Thirty-three percent of the writing examples contained material coded for critical assessment of assumptions. In this stage, participants are questioning social and cultural assumptions related to economics, progress, consumerism, beauty and other values that a culture’s members often take for granted.

We have defined progress as a trend established by economists to measure and quantify economic growth. However, economic growth is not always sustainable and can have negative consequences. For example, economic growth in one country may lead to increased pollution and resource depletion in another country. This can be seen through the example of the Amazon rainforest, which is being destroyed to make way for industrial development. As designers, we have the power to influence this trend and promote sustainable practices. (Student D)

Stage 4: New perspectives

Twenty percent of the writing examples contained material coded for new perspectives. In this stage, participants are developing new ways of thinking about present assumptions. The following is an example from Student F, which shows how the student is beginning to think critically about the concept of progress and its impact on society.

I used to think of progress as an increase in wealth and technology. However, I am now realizing that progress can also have negative consequences. For example, the pursuit of consumerism can lead to increased production and waste, which can have environmental and social implications. I want to be a designer who is mindful of the potential impacts of my work and strives to create sustainable design solutions. (Student F)

Stage 5: Exploration of options

The remaining 2% of the writing examples contained material coded for exploration of options. At this stage, participants discussed the role of the interior design field in sustainability and their potential roles in their chosen field.

Stage 6: Development of action plans

Stage 7: Implementation of action plans

Stage 8: culmination of thought and action

Transformative Learning Theory

Transformative learning theory (TLT) is the process by which the worldviews of individuals, groups, and organizations are changed as a result of educational activities. The outcome of transformative learning is perspective transformation. Research findings indicate the potential of a range of educational experiences involving engagement in real world sustainability and natural resource issues to facilitate perspective transformation (Lange, 2004; Sims & Sinclair, 2008). This indicates that transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1990) is an appropriate guiding framework for inquiry into the effects of this course on student’s perspective.

While transformative learning is not a neat, linear process, several key phases have been delineated. They are:

1. Diagnosing the dilemma; 2. Self-examination with feelings of shame or guilt; 3. A critical assessment of epistemological, sociocultural, or psychological assumptions; 4. Recognition that one’s discontent and the process of transformation are shared and that others have negotiated a similar change; 5. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions; 6. Planning a course of action; 7. Acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one’s plans; 8. Building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships; and 9. A reintegration into one’s life on the basis of conditions dictated by one’s new perspective (Mezirow, 1990).

Figure 3 below shows the percentages of writing examples coded for each of Mezirow’s 10 stages of transformative learning. The stages with the highest percentages are stage 2: self-examination (35%), stage 3: critical assessment of assumptions (33%), and stage 5: exploration of options (7%).