

Winner

How has project work enhanced your learning experience?

Semester 2 project began with the unknown; it was an electoral government secret with all parties eager to know the outcome. A group of untried students of all ages, trying to gauge individual dynamics! We met, discussed and looked at each other nervously, in readiness for our project brief. Although I couldn't comprehend the initial project secrecy, it soon became evident that no one should be at an unfair advantage, with secrecy being the only way forward.

At this early stage of our new vocation, our studies covered a wide range of topics offering a basic understanding of built environment disciplines; these proved invaluable as our project advanced. Our group looked impressive, full of willingness to produce the expected and more. Where did I fit amongst us, who were thinking along similar lines? These questions exercised my mind in addition to the uncertainty that nearly all new projects bring.

Initial ideas were presented in the form of our building shape, internal and exterior design, although these changed slightly as our project commenced, common ground was achieved. A shared vision, belief, knowledge, discipline and commitment were all necessary. I started to quickly appreciate the dedication this would require and the importance communication would hold, if we were to deliver a vision.

Initially I was confused, I genuinely felt that I had no idea where to start and in my mind, I knew I hadn't the required knowledge to complete such a task! Were the others thinking the same? My reasoning emanates from one year spent at college resulting in limited knowledge. Perhaps my thoughts were wrong and that I knew more than I was letting on. This was going to be a difficult week, I could tell. Until we had time to regroup and decide on a way forward, this was how it was going to be; daunting to say the least!

With each meeting our strengths and weaknesses were revealed. Conflicts, as a result became inevitable as suggestions were exchanged deciding on an improved way forward; this was an important part of the process as we strived to gain our client's trust. An early appointment of a Project Manager would have alleviated any such problems; however this was not a requirement. As a result, problems such as unauthorised changes which would be addressed in the work place were overlooked; this did not reflect real practice.

As group allocation dictated specific areas of research, I found myself with that much needed drive. With the additional benefit of part time work for a major steel contractor, I started to enjoy the investigatory aspects of my task. The project pushed us to new limits and as a team; we had to prove that we could rise to the challenge. Ideas

S. Farrell: How has project work enhanced your learning experience?

presented were discussed and at times declined or changed; our project allowed us to work together and make decisions beneficial to our group.

We attempted to break down problems to make what seemed a mammoth task more fragmented. With individual members now focussed on an area of expertise, fundamental elements of our project came together.

Lecturers hovered with direction minimal; reflecting, this wasn't a bad approach as our project became self managed. What was missing was a lack of praise, although not within our group. I felt that this was a missing essential component, which is required to sustain drive no matter what stage of life you are at, or the magnitude of the task at hand.

Presentations became a wonderful tool; ideas with great diversity came to the forefront inspiring thought and change within groups, especially ours. This process in addition to scheduled group meetings, helped sculpt our final roof design. Risk was always on our mind, in our choice and methods preferred therefore presenting our ideas was unique. Although these ideas did not wear well during reviews, a unified decision was made to stick by our original plans and carry them forward.

Listening to others who are in similar positions, standing nervously, talking quietly, at times merging into the background hoping not to be seen, forge us into the people we become. We quickly appreciate that we are not alone and that we have merely been given the tools needed to commence a journey. Tools help shape us, while the correct advice guides us. This project was a tool structured to get the best from us. We were lucky, some groups weren't; this could clearly be seen through disorganised and lacklustre presentations. What we can take from this, is that projects are learning curves that can guide us towards our goal provided we have the correct attitude and discipline.

What I personally took from this project was the importance of good organisational skills and an appointed leader. Spending greater time to deliberate with a group, rather than make unnecessary impulsive decisions would have saved invaluable time.

In the absence of an appointed leader, decisions were democratic. This was a weakness, which I would work on changing for future projects. A person appointed to manage negates the possibility of individual temptation to veer away from decisions already made, which may otherwise go unchallenged.

Working as a part of a group can be encouraging or disappointing depending on individual aspirations. If the balance is wrong, the dynamics of the group can be seriously compromised. We however gelled quickly, working together well to meet the criteria expected. Having said that, actions have consequences; in our case the lack of such may well have cost us marks due to minor discrepancies throughout our design. Inexperience can be attributed to this and for all group members, an area where improvement should be made.

S. Farrell: How has project work enhanced your learning experience?

When my year three collaborative project presents itself, I will be more comfortable with the process and expectations. The key: good planning, leadership and communication. With this vision in mind, I am already looking forward to being part of a team that can design a modern sustainable project which is fit for future purpose.

Stephen Farrell, a second year Construction Project Management student in the School of the Built Environment, Heriot Watt University.