

Academic consultancy training in an interdisciplinary context (ACTi)

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# **Academic consultancy training in an interdisciplinary context (ACTi)**

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## **Introduction**

Three drivers sparked the idea to develop an interdisciplinary consultancy course. Indeed, re-evaluating current teaching/learning methods in order to prepare students for future realities. First, the changing society and the changing field of the profession of architecture and interior architecture (Bernstein, 2018) ask for a different way of educating our students to better prepare them for practice. In general everything is becoming more complex: regulations, climate change and the globalization are only a few aspects that cause the society to face major challenges. Indeed, many different systems (e.g. economic, human, political,...) play a role. The answers to such complex challenges ask for an interdisciplinary approach. Second, the idea of educating our students to be able to handle more complex problems also comes from the increasingly complex questions that are asked to the our faculty and university. We, the teachers and researchers, are increasingly being asked for our opinion, insights and specific skills to solve problems. Designers, architects and creative people in general have a useful skill - referred to as 'design thinking' - for approaching problems. Unique to this way of thinking is that the user is central; the skill requires such things as logic, imagination, intuition and systemic reasoning; it is solution-focused and not problem-focused. What (interior) architects excel in is that they are traditionally 'specialized generalists' who have learned to accept the uncertainty of 'not knowing everything'. And third, many of our researchers do not act as designers but as consultants who translate academic knowledge and apply it to practice. As consultants, they stand alongside designers (architects, interior architects or designers) and assist them in various ways. For example, helping in making design decisions that are academically substantiated, or shifting design discussions from taste to science. This method of consultancy requires a different way of thinking and reflecting. It also requires knowledge management, knowledge translation and application. The demand for such consultancy processes is increasing.

## **ACTi**

As the name of the course indicates, the course is developed around three skills: academic skills, consultant skills, and interdisciplinary skills. Working as an academic consultant means bridging two worlds. As an academic, you are asked to be critical, to provide a conceptual underpinning, to

apply theoretical frameworks or models, to use valid methods of analysis, and to ensure traceable results. Whilst as a consultant you are client-oriented and communicative, you provide an optimal service, you take the time to explore the commissioner's specific challenge, and you bring the message concisely but clearly. Adding the interdisciplinary context, you also need to be able to integrate disciplinary knowledge, making optimal use of the others' qualities. So that after graduation they are more widely employable in the work field and connect with the changing market. Indeed, the aim of the course ACTi is to offer interdisciplinary teams of students the opportunity to execute an academic consultancy project in collaboration with an external commissioner. Lectures, company visits and debates get the students acquainted with different disciplines, while working on a real life problem training their consultancy skills. This is an elective course for master students from different faculties (Faculty of Architecture, Faculty of Law and Faculty of Business economics).

The first goal of ACTi is to teach students to use their knowledge in a different way so that they are more broadly employable in the field and in tune with the changing market. When we talk about a changing market, we are talking about two important aspects. One, academics, (interior) architects economists and jurists in this case, are increasingly involved in policy, subsidy regulations, spatial planning, etc. where their insights, methods and reflection are deployed, leading to an increased demand for consultant competencies. Two, practice (in general) requires real bridge builders. These are professionals who can look beyond the boundaries of their own field and establish cooperative links between different disciplines, pointing to a demand for interdisciplinary competencies.

With ACTi, our second goal is the continuation of the civic idea which our faculty holds in high regard, by sourcing projects from practice locally. For this we use the research groups of all three Faculties that already have a history of civic role in regional projects. They provide the input which, on the one hand, provides a filter for relevant, for students, projects and, on the other hand, ensure quality assurance. The project the students are working on may be part of a larger project a research group is working on. Although the research group takes care to mold the problem/context to suit the students, part of the assignment for the students within ACTi is the ability to formulate a question on the given 'problem' and/or context, knowing full well that the formulated question will also guide the method.

## **How does it work?**

The course has 3 credits and consists of 2 parts: The first part, Interdisciplinary collaboration and the second part, Consultancy Training.

In the first part Interdisciplinary collaboration, we always start with a series of lectures, with an interactive component, organized from the different disciplines and subdisciplines. Secondly, we organize interactive workshops over several weeks in which not teachers are the knowledge transferors, but the students themselves. Interdisciplinary teams are formed where they can delve into civic topics and empathize with other (sub)disciplines through self-selected relevant social articles. To conclude the Interdisciplinary collaboration part, each student writes a reflective paper that shows that the student has learned to think and see differently.

In the second part Consultancy Training, taught in the second semester, students are given the opportunity to work in interdisciplinary teams to carry out an academic consultancy project in collaboration with an external client. Distilling and formulating the (research) question from the given problem, coming from the external client, is central to this. For each student team, a coach is appointed to assist the group in the consultancy process. The coach is always a member of the ArcK and/or BEW research group with experience in consultancy and with a link to the client. This requires a devoted team of teachers (managing the lectures and debates) and coaches (managing the consultancy assignment). Each year different coaches are involved, based on the research projects that are being conducted at our faculty.

## **Outcome**

We have been able to organize ACTi for two years so far. We conducted a survey amongst all stakeholders on 3 levels: the students and their learning curve, the teachers and coaches on the results, and the external clients for whom the students were working. First of all, the students are very satisfied with the course and indicate that ACTi has made them think differently about their own domain and about their own competences. Because of the interactive teaching moments, their view is broadened and the learning moment falls in the lesson but also certainly after the lesson because they keep thinking through and reflecting. The teachers and coaches are also satisfied with the results the students produced (paper and consultancy assignment) and a clear growth process is also visible along these lines. Finally, we also notice that external clients are very enthusiastic about working with our students. They indicate that students come up with innovative ideas that also

make them think and reflect. For the years to come we hope to expand this group (both student numbers and coaches and faculties involved) into a university-wide course in the coming years.

## **References**

Bernstein, P. (2018). Why the Field of Architecture Needs a New Business Model. Architectural Record. Retrieved from <https://www.architecturalrecord.com/articles/13462-why-the-field-of-architecture-needs-a-new-business-model>