

Chapter 52

The Collaborative Gap: A Case Study of Interdisciplinary Design Education

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ABSTRACT

In the United States, many university based architecture schools feature shared learning experiences for beginning students in related applied design disciplines. These shared learning years are sometimes referred to as core studies or foundations studies, and incorporate a structure of communal course work that exposes students to basic design principals and elements. Although many of these disciplines are interdependent and interwoven in the professional realm, they become largely isolated from one another after the initial year(s) of foundational study. This chapter outlines a teaching experiment which addressed the phenomenon of disciplinary isolation by linking graduate level architecture students with undergraduate seniors studying interior design in a joint studio project. The experiment is presented as a case study and provides a basic outline of the course process along with a discussion of the critical successes and failures associated with the experience from the perspective of: the learner, the instructor, and the institution. The chapter highlights the importance of a student-centric learning approach in the design of collaborative course work and offers a candid assessment of the difficulties associated with collaborative teaching, such as: time intensive instructor coordination, shifts in methodology and pedagogy, and rigid institutional structures.

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INTRODUCTION

In applied arts education, the shared learning approach has roots in the conceptual model of the Bauhaus (circa 1919) which began with a full year of study devoted to basic design principles and techniques viewed as foundational for later specialized (yet interdisciplinary) study. However, in contrast to the Bauhaus ideal, contemporary students of design often encounter a considerable volume of discipline specific knowledge and individual program needs (dictated by accreditation requirements) which tend to limit extended interaction. Although many of these disciplines are interdependent and interwoven in the professional realm, they remain largely isolated from one another during formative years of study.

In recent years there has been much discussion on the topic of shared learning in the academe ranging from preschool to post-graduate studies (Speck, 2003). Such discussion has sparked pedagogical debate that spans many disciplines, including the applied arts. These deliberations often address the positives and negatives associated with the use of collaborative techniques in the classroom (Bush, 2003) though few focus on the methodologies utilized and fewer still elaborate on how these skills are taught in the context of the design studio (Bronet & Schumacher, 1999). Additionally, little research exists regarding the impact of collaborative teaching on instructors (Barkley, Cross, & Major, 2004) or the complexities associated with collaborative teaching at the higher institutional level.

The material presented in this chapter is based on, and expands upon, a body of previous work on the part of the authors regarding collaborative teaching which includes: collaboration in the design studio (McPeck, 2010; McPeck & Morthland, 2010) and assessing group work in the design studio (McPeck & Morthland, 2011). This chapter chronicles a response to disciplinary isolation through the use of collaborative teaching based on student-centric learning techniques. It is

presented as a case study experiment and provides discussion of the experience (critical successes and failures) from the perspective of three key stakeholders: the learner, the instructor, and the institution.

This experiment took place at a publicly funded research university located in the Midwestern region of the United States. The university student population at the time of the experiment was approximately 20,000 students. The school size was approximately 494 students; 114 fashion design and merchandising students, 66 interior design students, 283 undergraduate architecture students, and 31 graduate level architecture students (Southern Illinois University, 2011). At the time of this experiment, upper division interior design and architecture studios typically enrolled 10 to 20 students.

At the host institution, interior design and architecture students take a ‘core’ of design courses for the first two years of study that teach basic design principals and elements, design communication (hand sketching, computer aided design, model building, presentation skills, etc), design process, basic construction elements, and architectural history. After two years of combined study, students officially declare a major and take specific program course work. There are some areas of continued overlap; however, the two programs have distinct studio tracks after year two. The fashion design and merchandising program has an entirely separate course structure for all levels of study.

The studio course is a balance of theory (i.e. lecture) and practice (i.e. problem solving). The precise mixture of theory and practice for any given studio is based on course objectives and specific project typology. It is almost always left to the discretion of instructors as to how material will be presented and how class time will be structured. While the bulk of instruction for these courses traditionally entails many hours of one on one dialog between student and professor (known in design circles as “crit time”), there are often large amounts of unstructured class time that en-

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