Chapter 12
Collaborative Spectra: Mille Feuille Design Workshop – Teaching Individuals Design through Group Work

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ABSTRACT

Two teaching experiences that structured individual student learning through the designed variation of group work opportunities are examined: a graduate architectural design studio and a repeated undergraduate course focused on methods and approaches for designing. The teaching approaches draw on participatory design and group learning theories. Group work was structured as a series of overlapping layers to bring about an individual learning experience and a shared studio experience of creativity. Various outcomes are read against an excerpt from Nancy’s “The Inoperative Community” in Bishop’s Participation (2006b). The discussion is a means to further explore common interests in designing design processes, in particular through developing collaborative learning in design, and a social-reflective practice in students. The authors are figuring yet another way of developing creativity wherein a student’s skills, projects, and ideas come out of, and are intersected by a complexity of social processes, oppositions and the spectra that define them.

INTRODUCTION

Learning emerges because of interactive mechanisms, where individual knowledge is shared, disseminated, diffused and further developed through relational and belonging synergies. Collective learning can therefore be conceived as an evolutionary process of perfecting collective knowledge. (Rieger & Young, 2015, p. 60, citing SpringerReference.com)

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Since the turn of the century there have been many calls for teaching collaboration in design studios, and the value of collaborative approaches to design. The authors’ common interest is in teaching of and research into design processes where development of student designers’ selves occurs within group processes in the world – one author’s interest emphasizing participation and the other’s reflective thinking. This chapter is an opportunity to connect these threads.

A review of calls for how to teach architecture and, specifically, design studios, follows. For our chapter, these seem to reveal three concerns: awareness of communication and transdisciplinarity, becoming self through engagement in group processes and situated, applied design and tacit learning. Where the profession of design teaching as a whole has commented on the value to students of collaboration, in specific design studio examples, exploration of concepts of collaboration, and how to structure it, have both instrumentalized and explicitly integrated collaboration in the creative process.

From 2000, the American Institute of Architects Students (AIAS) Studio Culture Task Force investigated studio culture in architectural education in the United States. The AIAS suspected studio culture was somewhat wanting in the workloads expected of students, how students were being treated (especially in reviews of projects) and, as the principal vehicle at the core of architectural education, whether it actually prepared students for the world of professional practice. Two aspects of what the Task Force found – among twelve – bore particularly on the last point, whether studio culture prepared students for the world of professional practice. These were phrased as:

Collaboration is the art of Design (“students would be better served by learning about the value of collaboration”), and ...

Design is inherently an Interdisciplinary act (Koch et al, 2002, pp. 12-13).

Two years later, the AIAS examined progress toward more sustainable, equitable and relevant studio cultures in schools of architecture. Among characteristics of studio culture was ‘competition vs. collaboration’ (Kellogg, 2005, p. 11). In other words, both should be assumed. In the next AIAS report, among 10 Best Practices, Guidelines and Recommendations, item 10 included the development of ‘successful team collaborators’ and item 5 asked for ‘cross-disciplinary educational environments’ (The Second AIAS Task Force on Studio Culture, 2008, p. 17).

In Australia, the most comprehensive review of studio teaching in art, design and architecture was driven by a concerned group of academics, funded by a federal government grant. Like the AIAS, this review based its findings on interviews with deans, heads of schools and focus groups of academics, but also on two-day workshops with interested academics in a number of cities (Zehner et al, 2009). One of the aims of the review was to uncover effective studio practice in each discipline. Among the Benchmarks for Studio Teaching, ‘effective collaboration among students’ was noted and ‘multidisciplinary’ projects (v. 1, p. viii) for more positive student and staff experiences. Volume 4 of the Report (Case Studies of Effective Practice) provides twenty-seven examples of good studio teaching practice, a number of which are ‘multidisciplinary’/‘cross-disciplinary’/‘transdisciplinary’ (for varieties of teamwork, teaching or practice) and a few which are explicitly ‘collaborative’. The evidence of student opinions of good studio teaching practice is highlighted. Item 1 was: “Students appreciate opportunities to work collaboratively with their peers” (v. 4, p. 12).

A more recent text variably covers nineteen schools of architecture, how they see themselves now and into the future regarding pedagogy, issues to focus on, preparation for practice and so on. Examples
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