Collaboration: Increasing its Scope in the Design Studio

Mississippi State University　　　　　Greg G. Hall

1. Introduction

The architecture curriculum is challenged to address an increasingly complex array of subjects in response to professional, industrial, regulatory, institutional, social, environmental, and economic pressures. Addressing these often limits the opportunities to develop activities that help prepare students for a collaborative profession. This has led me to develop a series of studios that have challenged students to work in large groups, make collective decisions, and rely upon each other to move design projects forward. The goal has been to help them develop collaboration skills and be better prepared for practice.

2. Collaborative Studios

Two studios that I designed and taught provide observations about the challenges of implementing different learning models to address collaboration. One was a ten-week/one-term, third-year undergraduate architecture studio of 13 students. Another was a 20-week/two-term first-year graduate architecture studio of 16 students. Each studio project was hypothetical and for specific sites. The significant difference from conventional studios was that students were required to work as one team rather than in pairs or small groups. In the case of the 16-person team studio, the students were also challenged to collaborate with students at an international university with whom they collaborated virtually and did not meet until well into the design process.

3. Observations

Initially, students were resistant to a new and different studio structure. They wanted to work in smaller groups or individually—an unviable option that, along with overall parameters including student responsibilities and instructor involvement, had been contracted at the start. Students had difficulty determining roles other than lead designer. Their resistance to making joint decisions was evidence that most had not worked as a member of a design team and had not received instruction about collaborative skills. Most critical was their reluctance to let go of their attachment to creative authorship and seek satisfaction in other areas of project development.

The following summarizes these studios with observations and responses, many of which identify areas that require further development to fully expand the scope of collaborative studio projects.

Risk – Students, and faculty, are often risk-averse. Because of this it was important to discuss frankly accepting and managing risk as a professional reality. Pointing out that the studio itself was a risk for me as a faculty member served as a case in point and allowed me to lead by example as I navigated unforeseen issues as they arose and often discussed them with students. This helped instill confidence. It also assured

them that I was open to experimentation and learning—important for development.

Relevance – Students questioned the basis of the studio structure and benefitted from discussions about why it was structured differently. For example, it was important to talk about the importance of collaborative skills to success. Case studies that demonstrated effective collaboration helped students move past the differences with previous studios and appreciate the value of the present experience, particularly when reinforced by outside professionals.

Skills – Similar to the ways in which a studio may feature supplementary sessions on issues such as codes and technical details, sessions about the mechanics of collaboration helped students develop negotiation, leadership, and communication skills. Again, engaging professional helped to underscore instructor direction.

Assessment – Evaluating joint work and assigning individual grades is problematic. Creating individual assignments on issues outside the design problem such as collaborative tools and skills reinforced the studio's goal and increased individual grading opportunities. A rubric aligned with these areas reinforced equity. In addition, self and peer assessment supported faculty assessment and served as a learning tool. Although these did not completely resolve the challenges of assessing collaborative work, they mitigated the difficulty.

Conflict resolution – Initially students looked to me as the instructor to mediate and resolve conflicts. Emphasizing their responsibility to resolve issues and my role to provide support and discuss strategies rather than intercede helped them to take on the responsibility of identifying and proactively resolving conflicts.

Design – Students tended to see the design process as an aesthetic or technical process. They benefitted from defining design as a decision-making process rather than an aesthetically- oriented process. When reinforced with relevant assessment criteria, students began to adopt a new way of talking about design and design decisions.

Reinforcement – At one point a student mentioned a potential employer's overwhelmingly positive response to her cover letter in which she mentioned working on a collaborative studio project with 15 other students. This anecdote underscored the value that the profession places on soft skills such as collaboration and lessened students' apprehension about a new model.

4. Summary

Although unresolved challenges (e.g., the relationship of a collaborative studio to the overall studio sequence, including collaborative work in accreditation documentation, coordinating teaching responsibilities, and accommodating faculty evaluations that include negative comments in reaction to change) remain, these provide further opportunities to modify curricula to facilitate collaborative studios.

When presented with reasonable goals, supported, and coached effectively, students rose to the challenge and were adept in making the transition to a new learning model. This was most evident at a midterm review when I observed a change in their choice of pronouns—they referred to "our project" rather than "my project" and used "we" instead of "I." Along with a new sense of engagement with collaboration, this was evidence of a successful shift in their thinking and behavior. It demonstrated improvement in their professional skills.

As I approach the challenge of addressing a widening range of subjects and issues in the architecture curriculum, I have found that increasing students' collaborative skills helps them more readily take on the challenge of acquiring other skills. Although the number of collaborative activities in architecture curricula is increasing, there remains the great potential to expand their scope and better prepare students for success in multi-disciplinary settings.