

PEDAGOGY, TRANSFORMING SCHEMES

Practice and Pitfalls:
The Collaborative Communication
and Architecture Studio

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INTRODUCTION

At Clemson University, a unique program infuses presentation and communication skills into the core of a traditional Architecture studio class. University disciplines have long been observed to have unique cultures. Therefore, when designing an inter-disciplinary course, the differences need to be considered and managed. This paper addresses the ups and downs, positives and pitfalls of the collaboration between Architecture and Speech and Communication. The discussion covers issues in the design, implementation and evaluation of the collaborative process. I suggest guidelines to facilitate the process and make the collaboration successful for both disciplines and of course, the students.

The project review is at the heart of architectural education. Frequently conducted in a special "jury" room, students present projects they have designed to be reviewed and criticized by a panel of professors and fellow students. Yet few students are given training tailored to the specific requirements of the architectural presentation process. The outcome of this lack of preparation has been years of student and faculty frustration, reports of lowering self-esteem, and the perception of continuing poor reviews. Professors complain that their students are ill prepared and that they lack the ability to present arguments clearly and professionally. Students have complained and questioned the method. Is there a better way to teach young architects?

To address this question, the Clemson School of Architecture changed its undergraduate curriculum to include oral communication as a fundamental component of the design studio. The challenge from the communication faculty's perspective was how to take the particulars of the culture of the school of Architecture into account and design an appropriate course that would fit. That is, how do you approach teaching a skill in a way that is appropriate to the culture? An additional complication is the integration of one discipline into the studio of another discipline. How are two professors to

integrate two courses? What are the issues that develop, and what are the ways to resolve them?

This paper will discuss the design, implementation and evaluation of the collaborative studio, as experienced at Clemson University. Finally, following a discussion of the current studio experience, I list some best practices and guidelines.

THE COURSE DESIGN

The process of designing and delivering the class has been and continues to be an evolution. Several class models have been implemented, based on the requirements for credit, the scheduling of projects, and the topics of instruction. One way to design the communication component is to set aside weekly time, an hour or so each week. This schedule gives consistency and regularity, and provides a constant presence and reminder of the importance of the communication component. A second model is for Speech and Communication faculty to meet with students for longer periods several times a semester, in workshop format. This schedule allows intensive feedback sessions, opportunities for group interactions and activities that relate to oral communication skills. Finally, a third model is to divide the studio into small groups and work intensively with each small group for part of the semester. This allows the students and professor the opportunity to work in depth on oral communication skills and give feedback on an individual basis. However, the opportunity for progress over the semester is lost. Each of the designs gives the communication faculty an opportunity to lecture, work with small groups, give individual feedback, and attend reviews.

A pitfall of all three models is that the amount of time devoted to the architecture studios is relative to the number of students in each section. An ideal number is from twelve to twenty five. In the case of Clemson, we have occasionally had to work with combined studios of up to seventy-five students, which makes individual feedback and multiple reviews far too time consuming.

A second problem of design is coordinating the needs of the Speech and Communication professor with the needs and design of the Architecture professors in terms of topics and timing. Speech and Communication professors have specific topics and material that needs to be presented, and the coordinating architecture faculty do not always understand the importance or relevance. Architecture

faculty may be focused on the product, while Speech and Communication faculty may be concerned with the structure and process of delivering the message. This difference is revealed in the review process. For example, an architect may value a presentation that is aesthetically delivered, whereas a Speech and Communication professor may be critical of the organization pattern, or use of rhetorical devices. Because of these differences, assignments may be constructed to demonstrate architectural skills, but not take into consideration the standards and requirements of an effective presentation. For example, in one class the Architecture professor required that the students read their presentation and present their projects in a particular order. This assignment was difficult for the Communication professor to evaluate, since it circumvented delivery requirements, and was organized in a static pattern.

IMPLEMENTING THE COURSE

The implementation process and coordination with the needs of the faculty in two disciplines is ongoing at Clemson. We have encountered difficulties in the relationship of the Architecture faculty and the Speech and Communication faculty in a few of the studios. The lack of true collaboration has led to frustration and misunderstandings. True collaboration is an equal partnership in a synergistic course. We have found so far that the Speech and Communication faculty are welcomed as guests and supplements, but not as partners. Because Architecture is seen as the primary focus of the studio, perhaps this attitude is necessary. However, it sometimes leads the faculty—and the students—to feel that the oral component is not really important, and in some ways works to undermine the teachings of the Speech and Communication professors. For example, students will tend to work very hard on their models and drawings, and leave the oral work (outlines and such) for the last minute—if they do it at all. There have been times when this has been a problem, almost appearing at times that the Speech and Communication faculty has to be invited into the studio and begrudgingly given time. Other collaborations have been open, sharing and valued. When the collaborating faculty are both valued, the students can detect this and place more emphasis on their presentations.

The research on situated learning—learning skills in the disciplinary context—suggests that students learn more than the skills, they also absorb the values, norms and culture of the discipline. (Brown, Collins and Duguid, 1989) Students pick up on what is valued and supported, and quickly learn to do what they need to do to get good grades. (Anson and Forsberg, 1990) Therefore, it is important for the collaborative professors to agree on the values and goals for presentations, so not to confuse the students and create conflicts as to whom they should please.

This issue arises particularly in the review process. In the Clemson collaboration, the Architecture faculty and the Speech and Communication faculty typically grade the reviews. The Architecture faculty look for design issues, the Communication faculty typically look for rhetorical and presentation issues. These goals may or may not be congruent in terms of the evaluation of the project. This discrepancy may be handled by separating the grades so that the student gets one grade for design, and another grade for presentation. (although often the Architecture professor may also give a presentation grade).

Additionally, the Architecture school has a culture of feedback that is foreign to most Speech and Communication faculty. The direct, often critical feedback may be seen as detrimental to student learning, in terms of the culture of communication. To the Architecture faculty member, however, the crit process is integral to the culture. This perceptual and value discrepancy needs to be addressed and thoroughly understood by both collaborators. The Communication faculty is not participating in the studio to change the culture; however, they may want to and be willing to discuss the consequences and issues of effective feedback with Architecture faculty as well as students. Furthermore, Speech and Communication faculty can be helpful to students in preparing them for juries, and to help students understand the particular learning process they are involved in.

ASSESSMENT

The Speech and Communication component has been assessed both informally and formally. Informally, opinions and perceptions have been obtained from students, faculty, and visiting jurors. Comments have been positive. Visiting jurors have commented upon the clarity and sophistication of the presentations. In addition, Architecture faculty have commented that the level of presentation was noticeably more competent, better organized, and students seemed more articulate. (conversations with Clemson faculty, NJ)

A more formal assessment has been done using videotapes of first semester students contrasted with third semester students. In all of the speech competency criteria, students showed improvement. A rating scale for the assessment is currently being developed. The improvements were in the following competency areas:

1. Ability to choose and narrow a topic appropriately
2. Ability to develop a clear thesis statement and organizational pattern
3. Ability to assemble and use effective and sufficient supporting materials
4. Ability to use nonverbal behaviors
5. Ability to choose, pronounce, and articulate grammatically correct language

The University oral communication committee assesses courses

receiving credit in oral communication as part of the general education requirement for undergraduates and uses these five competencies. Each semester the committee meets to review tapes from courses that are given oral communication credits. Architecture falls under this category, but is unique in that most other disciplines do not have collaborative Speech and Communication faculty. Therefore, it might be expected that the Architecture students do better on the university-wide assessment. This aspect of assessment has not been done.

BEST PRACTICES

The Speech and Communication faculty have been concerned with the collaborative issues. Jackson (2001) identified and presented the following best practices at a conference on "Communication Across the Curriculum," for the National Communication Association. Architecture professors may be surprised to see how much the Speech and Communication professors attempt to adapt to the Architecture culture.

1. Insure the support of your department and the department visited
 - You need flexibility of time and schedule
 - You will have an acclimation period to learn new language, culture
 - You will need resources such as copies, technology, materials
2. Know what is important and what is negotiable in your course content and process
 - Clearly define student outcomes
 - Know what strategies and methods are essential to the course
3. Be learner centered when coordinating with faculty. Be flexible, use intercultural communication strategies, lower defensiveness. You may be seen as an invader or interference
 - You may have to prove your value to the hosts
 - You may not be seen as an equal partner at first
4. Learn as much as possible about the host cultures, concepts, values.
 - Try to incorporate metaphors and examples that resonate with the host
 - Seek to understand the culture and how communication can further their goals
5. Communicate!
 - Ask for what you need, tell them what you are doing and why. Don't assume others understand

The best practices may apply to any Communication across the Curriculum program. From the design of the course to the final evalu-

ation, teamwork and cooperation are critical. Professors are used to working independently, designing, delivering and evaluating without sharing materials, rationale, or time. When the team work ideal is reached, the collaboration works smoothly and elegantly. When there are boundary and control issues, the collaboration breaks down.

GUIDELINES

The Clemson faculty who have been collaborating with the architecture faculty suggest guidelines for collaboration based upon their experiences. Each collaboration may require unique specifics, but it is best to set guidelines before the course begins. When the issues are discussed and agreed upon prior to class meetings, then the collaboration has a much better chance of succeeding.

1. Communication faculty meet to agree on standards and requirements for communication portion
2. If communication credits are given, clarify requirements for credit: hours and content
3. Meet before the class begins to set schedules and decide structure and hours
4. Agree upon class outcomes/goals with cross-disciplinary faculty
5. Meet with cross-disciplinary faculty frequently during the semester for check ups and discussion of problems
6. Share standards and criteria for student success
7. Remember that it is a joint class and that both professors are professional
8. Do not change assignments without informing the collaborative partner
9. Listen and respect one another's point of view
10. Meet informally and get to know one another

CONCLUSIONS

Collaborating on cross-disciplinary projects can be fun, creative and exciting. They can also be a nightmare of confusion, misunderstanding and disappointment. The experience at Clemson University has been positive and a basis for continued growth and experimentation. This paper presented the ups and downs of such a collaboration, and guidelines for the future. The Clemson program has generated a lot of support from professors and students and will be continued as a part of the Architecture program.

Each semester, each set of professor-collaborators will have to work out specific issues and formats. There is no best way to collaborate, no set formula for an effective integration. However, with goodwill and flexibility from the professors, the students greatly benefit by learning good presentation skills and habits as they learn the language and values of Architecture.

SOURCES

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