Blurring the Line: An Experiment in Interdisciplinary Design Education

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Today designers face an increasingly knowledge specific industry positioned in a constantly expanding global marketplace. Collaboration between vast arrays of specialized consultants situated in a variety of countries is the norm, rather than the exception, in the execution of a design projects. Yet, contrary to this interdependent reality, many design students are not prepared for the highly collaborative culture of the design practice they aspire to enter.

In recently completed research directly related to the role of collaborative design pedagogy within the realm of architectural education, the Authors explored factors which impact the implementation of such an education. In particular, respondents queried on the topic overwhelmingly indicated that, although there is high profile attention given to collaborative research endeavors, the same is not always true regarding collaborative teaching largely due to the difficulty of resource allocation; in particular human capital. "…whenever an administrator speaks to unifying and collaborating and going across to institutes across campus or whatever, the complexity begins, who should use the resources…" (Smith, 2004 as cited in [1]). It was this phenomenon that the author's sought to explore in their current research.

This paper chronicles a recent experiment in crossing over traditionally held departmental boundaries in order to immerse students from complementary disciplines into a collaborative "comprehensive" design project. The experiment underscored the difficulties associated with collaborative teaching such as; time intensive instructor coordination, shifts in methodology and pedagogy, and rigid institutional structures. The Authors present their findings as 'lessons learned from the perspective of the instructor' and utilize ongoing research to suggest strategies for improving collaborative learning through the support of collaborative teaching.