



Studio Teaching in Higher Education - Selected Design Cases

Boling, Elizabeth; Schwier, Richard A.; Gray, Colin M.; Smith, Kennon M.; and Campbell, Katy, eds.
Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2016

Book Review

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A conservatory of music in my hometown annually brings to campus a famous singer who leads a master class for its voice students. This is a ticketed event open to the public and regularly draws a large audience. It's simply fascinating to watch the singer teach. One by one, students come on stage, they perform pieces they have practiced for the occasion, and she offers her critique. Occasionally she offers a mini-lecture on some aspect of singing but mostly she makes students work certain sections of their pieces over and over, all the while offering correction, advice, and support. The audience hears how their music – which sounded pretty good, to begin with – improves with her coaching.

While a master class is not the same thing as a studio, the two pedagogies share certain features. In my experience, teachers of religion and theology rarely make use of studio pedagogies; this book made me realize that we should.

Studio pedagogy is typically defined by the following elements: lengthy design sessions conducted in large spaces where materials are readily available and works-in-progress can be publicly and permanently displayed. Instructors roam the space, stopping at individual desks to offer feedback that gets intentionally overheard by nearby students. Lectures and discussions are rare; studio pedagogy relies instead on coaching, modeling, correcting, responding, affirming or questioning choices, and occasionally offering on-demand content instruction. It combines authentic learning theory, constructivism, socialization into a profession, and the theories behind flipped classrooms and communities of practice. It shares features of other student-centered pedagogical approaches such as problem-based learning and service

learning, although it focuses more on the process of students taking iterative steps toward a final, deliverable product of their own choice and making.

This book is an edited volume presenting fifteen narratives by design instructors describing the studio courses they teach in fields like architecture, interior design, and instructional design. Contributors describe the joys, challenges, concerns, and vulnerabilities they have experienced through this sort of teaching. Overhearing their honest confessions and reactions is one pleasure of reading this book, and it gives the reader a taste of what being in a studio is like. This volume is also designed like a studio in that its editors explicitly eschew analysis and summary, preferring instead to “curate” the narratives and let readers draw their own conclusions.

Indeed, religion and theology teachers might have to work hard to relate this book to their contexts. It will be most directly applicable to those in field education and those teaching certain kinds of performance or design – preaching, worship, ritual, or religious architecture. Yet its implications are valuable to all who are intrigued by non-native pedagogies. As I read, I kept asking myself, “Why do we keep our critique of student work private?” As one contributor points out, it is often when budding academics begin to share our work publicly that we take it more seriously, find it more gratifying, and believe it has value. Why shouldn’t our students experience the same?

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