BACKGROUND

Arch 560: Site Design for Architects is a required large lecture course that my colleagues had taught as a site analysis rather than a site design course. It was therefore more theoretically focused with an emphasis on critical thinking rather than on practical skills that the students would need in their professional practice.

I first taught Arch 560 in Fall 2014. The course consisted of 87 students and was structured as two 75-minute lectures and a 75-minute lab (four sections).

After one semester, I decided to blend approaches as a way of encouraging the students to learn the practical site design skills and ways to design sustainably, as well as in a theoretically rich way relevant to their design studios and future practice.

FALL 2014 CHALLENGES

Having labs scheduled on four separate evenings (Monday-Thursday) made it very difficult to coordinate lab content with the Tuesday/Thursday lecture content. I tried to run the labs Mondays would be the last lab day and no labs would be held the relevant lecture. This resulted in being able to hold only 10 created a very complicated system.

I evaluated student understanding via reading responses, labs, exams, and projects. By the end of the semester, students designing sites for their studio projects, although I found these rather superficial in their analysis and implementation.

The following semester, I attended design reviews for studios included most of my fall semester Arch 560 students. I found fewer than 10% were implementing the design strategies and had taught them. This led me to realize that I needed to more effectively impress the importance of site on the students and have them do more design—and representation—based and labs, perhaps with fewer exams. I think the readings and reading-responses were a good way for students to their understanding, but thought that I could more directly do through small discussions in lab.

Two exercises to help students learn to understand topography

Cognitive Map of student’s home town

INCREASING STUDENT LEARNING THROUGH TEAM LABS

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I am teaching Arch 560 again this Spring (2016). I reallocated class time: I am lecturing once a week and the labs will be 75-minute long and include hands-on exercises and discussions in small groups of three. I have organized the groups according to their studio so that they can collaborate on site analyses, although they will complete the final site design individually.

I have organized the course into three sections:

1. Practical knowledge understanding the physical/natural aspects of site design. The differences between macro-climate givens (latitude/longitude, topography, etc.) and dependent micro-climatic conditions that one can modify slightly through design strategies.

2. Understanding the human and ecological context. The history of human use and site design as a palimpsest; as well as the contemporary context from the built physical environment, the social context, and cultural context.

3. Implementation. Research and apply knowledge to design the site and building project.

In the final project synthesis, students will need to address three components:

A. Representation as Design: Given a site and related data, how do you represent this data in its local, neighborhood, and larger urban contexts from various perspectives (macro and micro-climatic, historical, cultural, social, economic)?

B. Analysis as Design: Assess the data presented in each aspect (1-3) listed above and create an associational matrix to establish the design questions for the students’ particular site/neighborhood/city/region.

C. Design as Synthesis: Given the representation and analysis of data prepared for parts A & B, focus on your design questions and frame the solution. Translate design ideas into spatial representations that holistically resolve the many macro- and micro-site conditions discovered. Explicitly explain your design intentions with respect to the site and how this shaped the way you design a project.

I plan to track student learning over time by attending their design reviews in future courses to see if they continue to demonstrate an understanding of site issues and contexts as they move through their architectural studies.