

Practice Sessions: A Model for Engaged Learning

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Introduction

The teaching and learning of architectural design are often separated from the practice of architecture and its primary concern with buildings. To caricature the divide, one might say that the academy (where architecture is presented as a form of knowledge production and a discipline) views practice as merely pragmatic and restricted by the chains of capital, or that practice (where architecture is presented as the physical constructs which shape our cities and our lives) views the academy as merely conceptual and restricted by the impracticalities of unending freedom. This opposition is a false one that weakens our ability to appropriately prepare today's beginning design students for careers and lives as architects. The boundary between the academic institution and professional practice is increasingly blurred as corporate offices embed "studios" within their organizations, as students participate in design/build projects for clients and communities, and as digital culture begins to break down barriers to publicity and impact through fast and accessible modes of dissemination. Since 2015, the Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning at the University of Michigan has been engaged in a pedagogical experiment and curricular program called Practice Sessions that addresses this relationship between the academy and practice through immersive, intensive, engaged learning experiences. This paper presents Practice Sessions as a model for supplementing traditional, semester-long, individual studio projects with intensive bursts of collaborative design that expose students to the problems of practice and broader public engagement.

What is a Practice Session?

Practice Sessions is a five-year pilot program co-organized by the author with Adam Fure from Taubman College Architecture and Urban Planning at the University of Michigan and Assistant Professor Andrew Holder of Harvard University's Graduate School of Design. In preparation for marking its 200-year anniversary in 2017, the University of Michigan launched in 2014 the "Third Century Initiative," a \$50 million-dollar multi-faceted program whose primary goal was to produce innovative approaches to scholarship and learning. As part of this larger initiative, the university Provost sponsored a two-stage, university-wide competition to transform higher education through proposals for engaged and action-based learning. Practice Sessions was selected as one of three winning proposals from a group of nineteen finalists.

The program invites one internationally renowned architecture firm each semester to "import their practice" to the school for a four-day intensive workshop with students that culminates in a panel discussion and review with external critics. The workshop brief frames a problem or project from the office of the practitioner and asks students to work collaboratively in an intense environment. These events take place in the physical center of the school, the college gallery, where they are performed for

a public audience of students, faculty, and staff. Other components and events related to the program include a seminar course taught by the author, a public lecture delivered to the university community by the invited practice, and a forthcoming publication co-edited by the three organizers. Approximately 25 students participate in each session and they are drawn from the graduate and undergraduate architecture programs and well as master's degree programs in Urban Design, Material Studies, and Digital Technology. Practice Sessions recently completed its third year and the six architecture practices who have led sessions so far are Ensamble Studio (Madrid/Boston), Johnston Marklee (Los Angeles), MOS (New York), NMDA Inc. (Los Angeles), Point Supreme (Athens), and Sam Jacob Studio (London).

Goals

Practice Sessions has three primary goals related to learning and pedagogy. First, the program shifts the typical semester-long timescale measured in weeks to a high intensity, short-term scale measured in days and even hours. This shift changes the tenor of the educational experience from a lower-intensity mood spread out over a long period to a more potent tone that incites decisiveness and fuels excitement and high levels of motivation to meet the expectations at hand. Second, Practice Sessions introduces broad concerns and public intellectuals into the academy. This counters the typical notion that students need to leave the institution (through summer internships or study abroad programs, for example) in order to experience public engagement. It binds the academy to the "outside" world, positing that educational environments can engage concerns of public import. Third, the program aims to alter the typical emphasis on individual creativity and proprietary ownership of ideas to place value on collaboration and the collective development of concepts and designs. The relatively risk-free environment of the weekend workshop allows students to pitch ideas quickly, to brainstorm and "whiteboard" concepts and iterations, and to develop an entrepreneurial approach in order to understand creativity as the outcome of a collective process, not inspirational genius located within an individual.

Components

There are five key components to each four-day session:

1. A figure (or, figures): Practice Sessions relies on evidence that contact with an inspirational figure in one's field can have transformative impact on education. These figures provide models for career development, leadership, intellectual growth, and public engagement.
2. Labor: Practice Sessions requires an engaged and committed cohort of students who will work together in collaboration with the invited practitioner and each other. This emphasis on working in groups and in collaboration is key to the ethos of the program.
3. A design problem or task: Practice Sessions is premised on importing real-world problems into the academy. The specificity and constraints of the workshop brief provide the students focus and, combined with collaboration and the short time span, a risk-free environment of creative production. There are no wrong answers – the key to success lies in participation and engagement rather than creative genius.
4. The glass box: Practice Sessions takes place in a publicly accessible and observable part of the school, the college gallery. This glass-walled room located in the physical center of the school building allows the performance of practice by the students and the invited figure to be an

integral part of the overall program and invites participation from passerby who want to engage the session through passive observation, active listening, or direct contact with the workshop students. The insistence on this alternative, flexible learning environment derives from the program's stated goal of public engagement and its emphasis on collectivity.

5. A weekend: Practice Sessions depends on the compressed timeframe of an extended weekend in order to produce an immersive and intensive educational experience. A typical session begins on Friday afternoon and concludes on Monday evening. The program draws on existing, successful models of short-term content delivery currently being tested in higher education and in other fields.

Impact and Assessment

Assessment tools for the program were designed in consultation with the University of Michigan's Center for Research on Learning and Teaching (CRLT) and are implemented with their assistance through anonymous surveys and focus groups. The surveys are administered digitally through a web-based interface that can be accessed on a desktop/laptop machine or a handheld device such as an iPhone or iPad. The surveys are designed to take no more than ten minutes to complete and include questions on content, format, invited guests, and suggestions for improvement. The focus groups are led by an assessment specialist from CRLT and students are asked, in small groups, to discuss the following: their expectations entering the program and whether or not they were met; the transformational nature of Practice Sessions, if any; the key features that were valuable; and how the program could better achieve its stated goal of, "allow[ing] students to work on current problems of broad public significance in collaboration with significant figures in architecture."

To date, findings show that Practice Sessions has significant impact on student learning in the following ways:

1. Bursts of intensive focus offer students important, alternative platforms for both skill building and creative output.
2. Contact with an inspirational figure from outside the school is transformational, reversing the typical structure where students leave the academy to pursue "real-life" experience through internships.
3. Positive collaborative experiences that focus on a common problem offer students a relatively risk-free environment to be bold in their propositions and act as public citizens rather than in their individual interests.
4. Students develop a renewed interest in practice and find ample opportunities for creativity in the more practical phases of building design, an experience they do not feel they have in other courses.
5. Heterogeneous groups of students working together across programs and years allows younger students to learn from their peers and vice versa.

Further analysis of the assessment feedback allows the identification of core strengths to be retained and developed. These are: an opportunity for a positive collaborative experience in a guided setting; vertical learning groups that expose students to new peers; an encounter with architectural practice that is rarely presented within the academy; a relatively risk-free learning and creative environment that feels liberating and fun; the relief of pressure due to it being a supplemental program that is not subject to graded evaluation or course credit requirements; the freedom of fast decision-making that

allows one to test ideas quickly and un-self-consciously; and the overall energizing nature of the experience that produces rejuvenated excitement about students' education and choice of profession.

Challenges

Practice Sessions is currently 60% of the way through its grant cycle, as this initial pilot version of the program is set to end in Spring 2020. This circumstance offers an opportunity to incorporate responses and assessment outcomes into future planning and to allow a true feedback loop to continuously improve the program. Reflecting on the sessions that have occurred so far and taking the student feedback into account, a series of challenges and questions emerge:

Can Practice Sessions be incorporated into the curriculum? Do the benefits of an extra-curricular pursuit (e.g., allowing students to rehearse creativity without the pressures of grades and formal evaluation) outweigh the downsides (e.g., asking students to work on a weekend produces a potential barrier to access for those who need to work or have families)?

Does the program offer cues for rethinking studio pedagogy? Could studio benefit from short bursts of intense activity and/or more collaborative efforts? Do studios need to be semester-long in order to achieve their goals?

What other models of practice should and can be investigated through Practice Sessions? What can we learn from looking to practices that are more corporate, more infrastructural, or more trans-disciplinary? How does the program actually work to define practice itself?

How can the program more intentionally serve our desire to increase diversity, equity, and inclusion for all students? Can demonstrating alternative modes of learning and practice allow the academy to reach new cohorts and/or more effectively teach the ones we have?

Is Practice Sessions sustainable? How can the program extend beyond the original grant cycle and/or be replicated by other departments and disciplines? In a context of higher education's more general goal of enhancing engaged learning, what role can Practice Sessions play in demonstrating its effectiveness?

Conclusion

Practice Sessions has afforded exposure to figures, practices, and modes of design thinking that students would not otherwise have encountered at Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning. It has instigated a conversation among faculty, staff, and students about how architectural education might evolve in the near and long-term future and how to address pressures currently on the academy to incorporate professional, real-world experience into our curriculum. The program has demonstrated the significance of immersive, intense learning environments and the fresh perspectives offered by alternative formats that supplement traditional studio pedagogies. Practice Sessions has further potential to play an important role in changing architectural education to be more inclusive for all students and faculty and this aspect of the program needs to be developed more specifically. In an era when in-person educational experiences are being pressured by online formats and flipped classrooms to articulate their value, the program provides a model for engaged learning that binds together the intellectual and public ambitions of the academy. Practice Sessions breaks down the

perceived divisions between the academy and practice to reveal how action-based learning can produce public intellectuals poised for collaborative pursuits.