A two-way street? Investigating the dual nature of the exchange between practice and teaching.

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ABSTRACT This paper aims to investigate the dual nature of exchange between students and teaching-practitioners (practicing architects who also fulfil a tutorial role) and the interface between practice and learning, created through the teaching process. Information was gathered from 20 teaching-practitioners to ascertain their views to what extent teaching has impacted on their work in architectural practice and to explore how they felt teaching was benefiting their practice work. The study looked at four specific areas within a design studio: the potential exchange of ideas, concepts or theories through conversations and discussions, areas of new skills which might be acquired by the tutors, longer term feedback through resourcing of ex-students and the role of an income from teaching.

KEYWORDS Teaching Practitioners, Design Studio, Practice, Teaching, Exchange, Ideas

The design studio is considered an essential part of any UK architecture course and a breeding ground for creative ideas, spatial investigations, dreams and drama. Its central role in teaching has been ongoing and much discussed; as Salama notes this ‘kiln where future architects and designers are molded […]’ has occupied a central position since architectural education was formalized three centuries ago in France and later in Germany and Russia, the rest of Europe, North America, and the rest of the world. It continues to occupy such a position in contemporary design pedagogy. ¹

The approach and structure of design studios varies greatly between schools of architecture, but also depending on who might be leading the studio, ranging from more academic approaches to craft training.² What architecture and interior architecture courses structured around design studios have in common, is that they provide an opportunity for involvement of teaching-practitioners (TPs) within the curriculum, i.e. educators who are not part of the permanent / full time academic staff, but work in or run an architectural practice whilst teaching part-time.
There has been a lot of discussion what and how TPs are contributing to the design studio and also who is best suited to provide the design studio teaching: ‘the non-practicing research-academics or private practitioners who may or may not be considered researchers depending on your definition of “research”’.

Often this debate focuses on teaching as a one-way street where knowledge is passed down from the teacher, in this case the TP, to the students. Having taught as a visiting lecturer in parallel to working in an architectural practice for many years, I am interested in the reciprocal nature of the exchange, the interface between practice and learning, created through the teaching process. Does it, as Marcus White suggests, create potential opportunities for development and innovation, which would be otherwise limited by ‘the monogamy and commitment to one specific aspect of architecture, be it practice, education or pure traditional academic research’? And how are these potential opportunities created in the interface between teaching and practice experienced and utilised by different TPs?

In order to explore this information was gathered through questionnaires and interviews completed by 20 individuals. Early on it was clear that this is a topic which encompasses a wide range of views and opinions. This study does not aim to represent a statistical or numerical survey of the teaching profession, as only a limited group of TPs was included in its scope. It is intended as a snapshot offering insights into different approaches, views and opinions which could provide a basis for further investigation.

The nature of the exchange between practice and teaching

As already touched on above, to some degree the question of what constitutes architectural research is often raised when discussing the distinction between TPs and academic teachers, i.e. educators which are not involved in architectural practices. White suggests that a boundary exists between ‘practice research knowledge’ and ‘academic research knowledge’, though he describes it as fluid, allowing and encouraging ‘cross pollination between research and private practice, practice as research, research led practice and practice led research’ and thus leading to a cross-pollinating three-way relationship between academic research, practice and teaching.

However, looking at the plethora of architectural practices today, this separation seems rather rigid. Does research into new materials for example only move from academic research into practice when it is successfully employed in a real construction project? What about the wide range of projects carried out in practice which never reach the physical realisation stage but might have produced important research for future projects? This study will therefore focus on a two-way exchange between the students (the teaching) and the practice (be it theoretical or practical). Even within the relatively small selection of practices interviewed for this study, the range of approaches varies widely, from a theoretical base of research led practices, to more construction and commercially focused practices. As the analysis of the responses received will indicate, this also impacts on the role of teaching within the practice, and how much the two activities are interwoven or regarded as separate.

During the teaching process, an exchange between tutor and student can occur on a number of different levels. In investigating in what way TPs might benefit from teaching it seemed important to look at some of these. Four main themes emerged, which provided the structure for the questionnaires distributed to the TPs.

What is probably most obvious and yet hardest to define is the exchange taking place on an intellectual level. Ideas, concepts, theories and thoughts form the basis of any architectural proposal. The intellectual discourse and research, which precedes and grounds the design proposals, sits at the heart of most design studio focused Interior Architecture and Architecture courses. The question here is twofold: how much do TPs feel that their practice ethos and work outside college impacts on their teaching approach and influences the brief /themes they are putting at the centre of the design studio? And on the other hand, to what extent has the practice work influenced by their conversations, discussions, exchanged with the students, be it directly or indirectly? This also relates back to the different types of practices discussed above.

Closely connected is the issue of practical skills, which in the context of this article describes the tools students acquire in order to translate the initial ideas and concepts into...
spatial proposals. This includes learning the craft of architecture (drawing, modelling, etc), but also other specific skills practicing architects hold, which Vivian Mitsogianni describes as juggling ‘a multitude of intersecting conditions, and ideas – many of which are not concrete or known, with partial information that is constantly shifting. We hold this uncertainty and we make decisions and push and steer projects in an agile and flexible way – constantly moving and shifting components when they need to be revised, as better ideas come up and as more information presents itself. We engage with multiple stakeholders and coordinate the input of a wide range of specialists and consultants. We do all this with expertise that is applied to situations that are different each time, different sites, typologies and we strive to do so in ways that innovate the discipline.’

It has always been assumed that one of the advantages TPs have is to bring these important day-to-day skills to the students, from managing a design process, researching materials to producing cad drawings. But what about the other way round? Does the exposure to new techniques and drawing styles which students bring to the design studio table or screen have the potential to inject a new lease of life into a practices’ competition entry? To what extent might the physical output of an office be influenced by the exposure to student work?

 Whilst the former two areas of questions relate to individual TPs, it could be argued that there might also be a longer-term exchange of skills (for example complex 3D modelling) back into the practice through recruiting former students. Does being able to observe and teach students throughout an academic year provide a practice with a direct source of suitable potential employees, who then in a way bring back some of the teaching into the practice?

And finally the study looks at the financial benefit teaching might provide to the TPs. The interest lies in understanding to what extent the financial factor plays a role in the decision to start teaching and to continue for a number of years and how this weighs up against the other benefits discussed.

**Methodology: Who took part?**

From the 30 questionnaires distributed, 20 TPs yielded responses. When possible (in 8 cases) this took the form of interviews, with the remaining 12 collected as written responses.

The aim had been to approach TPs across a range of teaching institutions and occupying different roles within their practices. As it turned out half of the responses received were from owners or directors of smaller practices. This highlights an important group of TPs – architects who run their own businesses but remain able to and want to invest time in teaching.

Between them, the 20 TPs are teaching or have taught on 14 different courses in the UK, with 3 TPs also having experience of teaching abroad (Australia, Austria and Belgium). The majority teach/taught 1 or 2 days per week, so that the teaching activity is an addition to the practice work. Almost half (9) of the TPs taught at undergraduate level only, with 6 teaching MArch or Diploma students. The remaining 5 TPs were involved in both undergraduate and postgraduate education.

The figures below show the variety of different roles the questioned TPs held in practice (Figure 1) and also in the university environment (Figure 2).

![Figure 1: Roles held in practice](image)

Most of the TPs were part of a team teaching on the design module. Only 20% were currently or had at one time be teaching a studio as a practice.
Exchanging Ideas – Practice to Teaching

To investigate the nature of the exchange within the design studio, it seemed important to look at the relationship between the practice and the teaching. How close did TPs feel the two were intertwined – or did they consciously keep them apart? Within the wide variety of teaching courses on offer throughout the UK, some design studios appear almost as an extension of existing architectural practices, whilst other practitioners might keep a much looser link between their office work and college.

90% of the TPs questioned felt that their practice approach and ethos had a direct impact on the way and methods they used when teaching students. Interestingly no one quoted a stylistic or formal link, although walking around student shows this often feels to be the case.

Stephan Ledewitz sets out three aspects of design education delivered through the design studio: ‘It is where students learn and practice a number of new skills, such as visualisation and representation. It is also where students learn a new language [...]. Learning to explore and communicate ideas through drawing is a new experience for most students. Thirdly, and most significantly, the studio is where students learn to “think architecturally”’. All of these aspects can be and are greatly affected by the educators, but it is probably the third element which shows the biggest variation – and also offers the most opportunity for TPs to introduce elements of their practice in to the design studio and encourage an exchange of ideas.

The types of connections between practice and teaching experienced by the TPs were quite varied as Figure 3 illustrates. A large group thought that, although the students project had the luxury of being much more free and experimental, the modes of conceptual enquiry and design methodology normally used in the TPs practice could be applied and taught – relating back to the specific skills held by practicing architects which Mitsogianni describes. Bernd Felsinger (Atelier 10), explains that the practice ethos ‘necessitates exploration and […] pushing boundaries’, an approach which has directly influenced his teaching. Alex Haw (Atmos) agrees that design strategies are passed from practice to teaching, such as ‘deep; iterative; diagrammatic exploration; starting dumb & elaborating; functionality first then wrapping, twisting, morphing, merging form & meaning’.

A second group saw the link more in relating to themes, which were currently relevant to the practice and being brought into the teaching. These varied from current areas of interest (e.g. an attitude to urban regeneration) to longer-term approaches such as hybrid use of spaces, intimacy and space, etc.

A slightly different viewpoint came from a third group who felt that it was their role as a practicing architect which most influence the teaching by allowing them to relate student projects back to the real world. As one TP phrased it: ‘This stops the exercise being "purely" paper architecture.’

Figure 3 illustrates the distribution of the various approaches within the study group.
The studio brief as mediator between practice and teaching

One area where the impact of practice work has the opportunity to directly influence the course is the creation on the design studio brief. It is also the area most influenced by the overriding course structure.

Of the 20 TPs, 8 were not involved in the brief development, either because a fixed brief was already set by the school/course leader, or students were creating their own individual briefs.

However, as Figure 4 illustrates, the majority of TPs involved in writing the studio brief established a link between practice themes or projects and the tasks set to the students. Most avoided a direct connection, there was a notion emerging from the responses that too direct link might be restrictive, such as for example setting the students the same exhibition centre brief on a real site which is currently being worked up in the practice.

Instead the briefs were generally based around wider issues and concepts which are of relevance to the practice. Geoff Shearcroft (AOC) explained that their post-graduate studio at The CASS last year tackled the theme of the ‘National Trust – a credible approach to legacy’, a subject AOC as a practice have been exploring for a while through various live projects. Shearcroft felt that this approach offers the students the opportunity to work on a project with a live angle/based in reality, thus balancing the projects between reality and the freedom of architecture school. At the same time, the scale of exploration into the subject greatly increased, as ‘practically you get 20 schemes at once which look at the issues from

Figure 3 (top): Relationship between practice & teaching; figure 4 (above): Influence of practice on studio brief
different angles\textsuperscript{11}, which in turn might benefit the practice’s work.

A similar approach whereby the design studio becomes a place of research for wider issues of interest to the TPs practices is illustrated by the Green Belt Atlas produced by students of unit AS2 at the Royal College of Art (Figure 5).

The design studio topic for the year was the Metropolitan Green Belt, a theme which at the time was relevant to practice work being conducted by all three tutors: David Knight (DK-CM), Charles Holland (Ordinary Architecture) and Finn Williamson, even though all three practitioners work in slightly different areas ranging from architecture to urban design and planning. As part of the course the students carried out a thorough mapping exercise of the green belt, which questioned the perception of it as purely a barrier to development. As David Knight explains: ‘Nobody really talks about it in its own right – only about what it prevents’.\textsuperscript{12}

The exploratory work done by the students within the design studio resulted in the publication of the Green Belt Atlas as part of an article by Johnathan Manns at The London Society. The atlas forms a collection of socio-political maps looking at how development can take place within the 35-mile wide band of protected Metropolitan Green Belt Land.

Selecting the green belt as a design studio brief allowed a two-way discourse between teaching and practice, an opportunity to re-think issues relevant to projects in the office, but in a much wider context and in more detail than a small practice on its own would have resources and time to conduct.

**Exchanging Ideas – Teaching to Practice**

The previous section offered examples as to how, through the assimilation of studio brief to practice themes/projects, teaching might offer TPs an additional forum to explore pertinent themes in more depth or from a new angle. However, this is only once aspect of the dualistic relationship between teaching and practice.

All of the TPs questioned shared the opinion that teaching offered a two-way exchange, at
least to some degree. Yet the description and responses of the exchange and what individuals felt they got back from teaching were very varied, but a few clear themes emerged:

**Teaching encourages development or improvement of ‘skills’:**

We already touched on the range of skills TPs might bring to the design studio. However, some TPs felt their teaching activity was also an opportunity to gain new skills they could employ in their day-to-day practice or exercising the part of the architectural training, which might be neglected in the office world. This included for example the ability to consolidate ideas to communicate, pursuing new areas of research the TPs felt required to engage in, or being able to edit projects to their essential ideas. Bernd Felsinger describes that ‘the task of absorbing and contributing to many projects in the course of a day […] taught me to search for the essence of the ideas without being distracted by the visual representation.’ But the responses also included acquiring more practical skills such as 3D modelling programmes in conversation with the students.

**Teaching offers inspiration / an opportunity to think outside the box, which has a positive impact on practice**

One common theme was the notion of teaching as a chance to venture beyond the constraints of the office projects. The dialogue with the students was often seen as a reminder to *free your mind, think outside the box* and offering a *space above all* – all of which had a positive impact on the office work. This is helped by the fact that the curriculum and ethos of many UK schools allows design studios to push the boundaries rather than mimicking ‘real life projects’. As one TP noted, teaching allows ‘an exploration of possibilities beyond simple functionality & mere form, unencumbered by time & budget’. It is interesting to consider these responses in the context of the on-going debate as to whether UK architecture schools prepare students sufficiently for the working life. Within the recent AJ Student Survey 2016, 35% of the students questioned felt that the course did not ‘equip them for practice’.

Looking at it from a different perspective though, this highlights a key role for TPs to act as mediators and to communicate to the students the unique opportunities of designing with the freedom of a college brief whilst learning and applying the skills needed in the later office life. It is this balance which can provide students with a flexible approach, responding to Nichol & Pilling’s call for ‘architects to become more skilled in the human dimensions of professional practice and more adaptable, flexible and versatile over the space of their professional careers. Architectural education must respond to these changes: it must enable students to develop the skills, strategies and attitude needed for professional practice and it must lay the foundation for continuous learning throughout life.’

**Teaching helps you to avoid getting stuck in day-to day of practice work and encourages critical approach & self-reflection**

Linked to the idea of using teaching as an opportunity to extend your horizon, many TPs also felt that the continued and structured critical discourse with the students about architecture, what we do and how we do it had a big influence of their practice through encouraging self-reflection and returning to core texts or principles. One TP phrased it as teaching offering ‘a way of staying optimistic’ through having conversations about the same themes but without the tedious components of office life, which allows you to enjoy the positive sides of a project and keep sight of the wider view.

**Teaching provides interaction with people (colleagues & students) which practicing as a sole practitioner does not**

For the sole practitioners questioned, teaching also provided a chance for exchange and discussion, which are essential in architecture.

**Teaching allows the exploration of practice topics in different context and from a different angle**

Whilst most of the issues discussed above impacted on the office work in a more indirect manner, a number of TPs thought the exchange
was more directly linked. Being able to influence and write the design studio brief they aim to use teaching as a testbed for ideas they were interested in, but would not be able to address within the office. This might be wider themes which were relevant to specific office projects or specific aspects of research which were later applied to projects.

White argues that by combining ‘research and teaching with practice, each project can incorporate an efficiency research component, leading to practices becoming faster and more agile, allowing practices to spend time that would have been lost with less efficient working methods to investigate new construction or fabrication methods; new materials; new design approaches; and new performative modelling methods.’

This crossover of a professional context and academic context was employed by Mobile Studio Architect’s for their window installation as part of the RIBA Regent St Windows Project 2014 (see Figure 6).

Prior to the competition win, Mobile Studio had focused the studio brief for their undergraduate design studio at the Bartlett School (UCL) on interactive architecture. This was an area of research of importance to the practice, but not something they had had the opportunity to investigate as part of any real / construction projects. Introducing the theme into the studio brief essentially allowed the practice to use the studio as an extension of the practice research and to test and research interactive architectural environments through the academic context of the studio projects, which lead to an interactive proposal for the RIBA window project. Mobile Studio Architects were one of 15 architects selected to collaborate with retailers along Regents Street to create window displays. In collaboration with the client Jack Spade a proposal was designed around the use of interactive architecture.

The competition win offered the opportunity to harvest the knowledge gained through the teaching and apply it directly to a real practice project. The collaboration between teaching and practice was further enhanced when the decision was made by Mobile Studio Architects to take on the making of the display in-house in collaboration with students from the design studio as well as a professional interactive designer. Thus the model making skills honed as part of the design studio teaching could be directly applied.

In this example, the boundary between teaching and practicing has become blurred and punctured. It seems that the relationship between the two activities this is fluid and very much depends on the practitioner, type of practice and also the opportunities provided by the course structure.

**Graphic representation and the [laser] cutting edge?**

It is assumed that TPs bring with them a ‘craft’ skill base of orthogonal drawings, details, presentation models and images, which they can pass onto the students. But 2/3rds of the TPs questioned also felt that this skills exchange worked both ways and that the graphic representation and modelling in the office had as some stage been influenced by the design studio discussions and outputs.
The experimentation and attitude towards new forms of representation in student work was often referred to as inspiring exploration in the practice presentation, both with regards to drawings and physical models.

Access to new and emerging techniques, such as complex 3D rendering, laser cutting or 3D printing was also regarded as an important aspect.

So by using their own possibly more traditional skills, TPs tutor students in pushing the boundaries and exploring the possibilities of graphic representation – which in turn might feed back into the practice work.

At the talent source?

Although there appears to be a definite exchange of ideas and inspiration, what effect does it have beyond the academic year? Any architectural practice heavily relies on the abilities and talents of its staff. Recruitment is a time- and cost-intensive process, from posting an advert, sieving through CV’s and cover letters to conducting interviews.

Talking to students all year, reviewing their work at reviews and summer shows and speaking to other tutors might provide useful opportunities in this context.

The relevance of this aspect obviously depends on the need for staff. Thus recruitment was not considered an important teaching benefit by the sole practitioners or by directors of recently started practices (together about 1/3 of those questioned), though most saw the potential. All the other ones agreed that this was an important contribution of the teaching to flow back into the office environment, and one architect even noted that the access to potential employees was the biggest driver in the decision to teach. Most had already employed ex-students or those recommended by colleagues.

Alex Haw (Atmos) commented that being able to observe and to talk to students throughout the year ‘enables a more open and on-going and transparent interaction than the stress that the interview process can otherwise cause the future recruit’.

Interestingly there was also a view that teaching can help to increase the profile of a practice within the academic environment, which could have a positive influence on number of applicants.

The role of the ‘financial incentive’

The feedback from the survey so far makes it clear that there are a whole range of incentives to teach. But one further motivation which cannot be overlooked is the income generated by teaching. How important is the role this plays in the decision of a practitioner to take up and continue teaching?

When asked to quantify the role of salary in the decision to work as a tutor, 35% of the surveyed TPs responded that pay is not a guiding incentive. It should be noted that most of these were employees in or directors/partners of larger practices, which were likely to receive a regular income already.

Another 20% of those questioned explained that the income gained from teaching was essential to provide them with a steady cashflow and allowed them to pursue their own work more freely. Unsurprisingly the majority of this group were sole practitioners or artists and architects focused on less commercial work. As one architect explained: ‘The income through my university work thus makes it possible to free my architectural practice from providing me with a basic income. As such I can be much more critical and precise in choosing the type of projects we take on…’

The largest group of responses (45%) though expressed that whilst they had been reliant on the income from teaching during the first few years of practicing as an architect/designer, this relationship quickly changes as the demands of the office grows. See Figure 7 for an overview.

As project size and workload increases, it would often be more lucrative for the TPs to spend the working time in the office rather than at the university, in particular as the pay often does not cover all the additional time spent on administration and preparation. Colleges in turn are loosing out on valuable and experienced teachers. There seems to be a real challenge for institutions to offer better opportunities for practitioners to teach and thus maintain this valuable resource.
Conclusion

The aim of this article was to investigate the nature of the exchange between teaching-practitioners and students and how a part-time involvement in architectural education might benefit and influence the individual TP’s work in architectural practice. Although the findings were based around a relatively small selection of interviews and questionnaires, the breath of responses has highlighted a number of interesting issues.

From the overall response provided by the TPs it is clear that the activity of tutoring in higher education is not perceived as a one-way street but regarded as influential on the day-to-day practice work. The study set out to explore four main themes: The two-way exchange of intellectual design concepts (ideas, concepts, theories and thoughts), the more tangible exchange of skills, the advantage teaching might provide for recruitment and finally the role played by the financial benefits.

The responses received on the first two areas of ‘exchange’ (intellectual ideas & skills) indicate that they are closely related and often overlapping. Two slightly different approaches to the relationship between teaching and practicing emerged:

In their feedback, one group of TPs described their teaching as a separate activity from their work in practice – an activity nevertheless which offers them the opportunity to expand their horizons, think outside the box and deal with the type of projects their office might not be able to engage in.

As discussed within this article, this suggests the need for a balance between maintaining the freedom of creativity so important to UK architecture education and bringing the specific ‘practice’ skills to the students. In his comments on the AJ Student Survey findings mentioned earlier on, Alan Dunlop (University of Liverpool) describes the role of the university as developing ‘students as designers, who have the expertise and knowledge required to make buildings of worth – not teach basic office skills and client protocols’.

A closer connection between teaching and practice, which starts to blur the boundary between the two activities, was described by a second group of TPs. This group used the design studio more directly to investigate themes and concepts relevant to their practices’ work. It seems that this approach was more applicable with postgraduate research and also to some degree relied on a longer-term commitment of TPs and schools, which would allow a particular direction of research to be established.

The opportunity offered by teaching to meet potential future employees, was generally regarded as a positive ‘perk’ by the TPs questioned, but not a decisive factor in the choice to teach.

A similar attitude was reflected in the responses relating to the payment received for teaching. The feedback also highlighted that, for quite a number of practitioners, the relatively low income from teaching means that this activity needs to cease as the practice becomes more busy and established.

Overall, the responses received during this study emphasise the variety of roles TPs can play in providing a bridge between practice and academia, which benefits both student and teacher. Allowing the TPs to nurture the dual nature of the relationship will strengthen this approach and ensure that TPs remain integrated into the education. As a next step it would be interesting to explore in more detail how the structure of the course impacts on the experience of the TPs and how it could be tweaked to maximise the mutual benefits of this dualistic relationship.
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