

Play in Architectural Pedagogy: *Shifting Allegiances and Trading Projects*

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This paper describes two pedagogical models for architectural studio courses, appropriate for undergraduate and graduate level studios. The first model, *Shifting Allegiances*, asks students to take responsibility for leadership of distinct issues, and the second pedagogy, *Trading Projects*, asks students to exchange ownership of projects several times over the course of the semester.

INTRODUCTION

Johann Huizinga posits that “First and foremost, then, all play is a voluntary activity.” For Huizinga, children need play because it “serves to develop their bodily functions and their powers of selection,” but for adults, “play is superfluous.” Play for adults is therefore not “ordinary”: it allows them to step into a temporary sphere of activity with its own disposition, such that while play is in progress it has “movement, change, alternation, succession, association and separation.” Huizinga posits that nearly all higher forms of play have elements of repetition and alternation like the warp and woof of a fabric. Play becomes memorable, and if repeated, tradition.

In our work as instructors in a professional architecture degree program, we each strive to create and foster environments in which students take a stake in a studio’s collective outcome. In responding to what we see as weaknesses in traditional “group work,” we have developed two related but distinct studio pedagogies which employ forms of play.

Distinct from typical pedagogical models for studio classes which require individual students to maintain sole responsibility for their own projects from beginning to end, our pedagogies involve multiple authors and shifting allegiances. Yet, our pedagogies are also distinct from group work, in which a group of students is assigned (or is self-selected) to complete a studio project.

Our pedagogies, developed over several years of teaching at North Dakota State University, are referred to as *Shifting Allegiances* and *Trading Projects*. Both pedagogies are designed to encourage exactly what Huizinga has referred to as “movement, change, alternation, succession, association and separation,” that is, play.

OVERVIEW OF SHIFTING ALLEGIANCES

The *Shifting Allegiances* pedagogy is organized to promote collaboration and shared authorship of projects among graduate-level studios. This is achieved by collectivizing the ownership of topical subject areas, to which students variously direct their effort over the course of the studio.

Normally lasting for a single semester, the *Shifting Allegiances* pedagogy begins with the instructor assigning a project to all students in the graduate-level studio. The studio initiates with a time-limited, intense, iterative visioning and sketching exercise, in which each student produces approximately 10 sketches, so that within 60-90 minutes, roughly 100-200 ideas are ready.

The ideas, in sketch form, are then arranged thematically for discussion. Through structured and rapid play (taking turns to move sketches), the students group the work into tentative conceptual categories, around which they coalesce based on interest.

Emerging from this initial exercise, each student is asked to assume leadership of a specific aspect or attribute of the project, with other students assuming support roles for the assigned aspect. These leadership subject areas are traded throughout the semester.

At any given point in the semester, every student is simultaneously a leader and assistant for various subject areas. As students cycle between projects, they are also adapting ideas from each other, and their allegiances to specific concepts or approaches frequently shift.

At two or three points in the semester, students are asked to publicly present their work and are given the opportunity to transfer their allegiance to a new subject area. Figure 1 is a diagram illustrating how a group of students may respond to a typical set of “shifts” within the studio. The figure emphasizes how students may form groups or elect to act as individuals. (The figure does not show the support roles held by each student.)

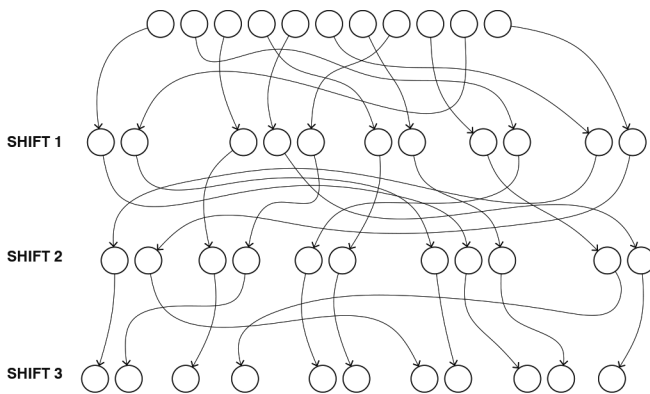


Figure 1: Diagram of *Shifting Allegiances* pedagogy.

By the end of the semester, each student has cycled through at least three or four leadership areas, gaining experience in leading and assisting in several aspects of architectural projects.

The *Shifting Allegiances* pedagogy may be summarized as follows:

1. A playful yet challenging design problem is provided to the students. (For example, “Design a new skin for the human body.”)
2. A time-limited exercise is conducted, in which students rapidly develop ideas.
3. The ideas are rapidly sorted.
4. Students coalesce around ideas based on interest.
5. Each student takes leadership of a specific subject area, with other students as support. These leadership roles are traded throughout the semester, and thus every student is simultaneously a leader and assistant for various subject areas.

Consequently, allegiances are not tied to people or groups but to ideas based on interest.

TRADING PROJECTS¹

A typical model for studio courses expects student projects to undergo long periods of individual, iterative development followed by whole-group critique. Whole-group critique normally occurs at regular intervals and is often concentrated at midterm or final reviews. In the *Trading Projects* pedagogy, a two- or three-week period of iterative development is followed by whole-group review discussions. At these whole-group discussions, the students exchange projects with each other. Critique is inherent in the moment of

exchange: students collectively discuss the relative merits of projects, and they decide collectively how the projects should be assigned.

Alternatively, the project exchanges may be systematically managed by the instructor. However, the students tend to “buy in” more actively when the act of exchange is structured as a form of play, e. g., when individuals enter into strategic negotiations on a pattern of exchanges. In any case, a student should not “inherit” a project which they have previously held.

Figure 2 diagrams a typical progression of projects in the *Trading Projects* studio. The numbers at the top indicate individual projects, and the circles represent students. The shaded circles show the trajectory of a single student, as she or he moves from “Project 1” to “Project 4,” on to “Project 5” and completing work on “Project 3.”

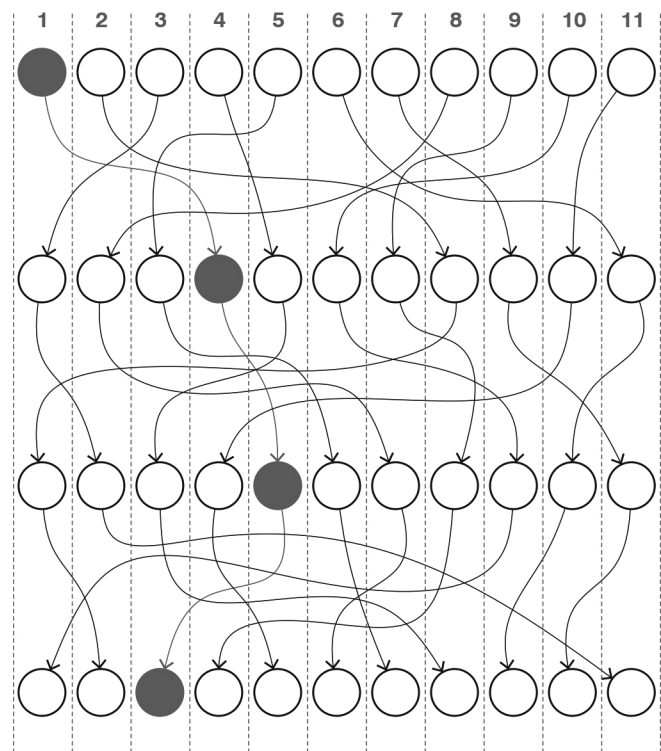


Figure 2: Diagram of *Trading Projects* pedagogy.

The *Trading Projects* pedagogy has both spatial and temporal implications for juried reviews. A traditionally structured review is arranged so that each student presents their project in front of an invited jury. A typical model expects each student to present their work in five or ten minutes, followed by comments and discussion. Occasionally, reviews of this kind may be arranged so that students are paired, and the jury’s comments are shared between them.

By contrast, the *Trading Projects* pedagogy asks that all projects are exhibited simultaneously, typically in an open assembly space. Rather than a select jury consisting of invited guests who remain seated, the *Trading Projects* pedagogy assumes that the jury is constituted by mobile guests together with the studio participants.

Because the goal of the *Trading Projects* review is to assign new ownership to projects, the discussion tends to center around issues of what comes next. This is in contrast to a traditional pedagogy which focuses discussion on *why* a project has taken on a specific form. Typical questions overheard at a *Trading Projects* review include “What makes you want to take on this project?” or “What is the first thing you intend to change about this project?”

The *Trading Projects* pedagogy also has a parallel to practices in professional architectural design offices. In particular, a professional project in a typical office may pass from the responsibility of one individual to another over the course of its work in the office. Moments of “handoff” in the professional office can involve intense discussions about project parameters, limits, and opportunities, that align well with the content of academic discussions at *Trading Projects* reviews. Figure 3 illustrates one of these moments in the *Trading Projects* studio, as two students discuss a project which one of them has recently “inherited” from another student in the group.

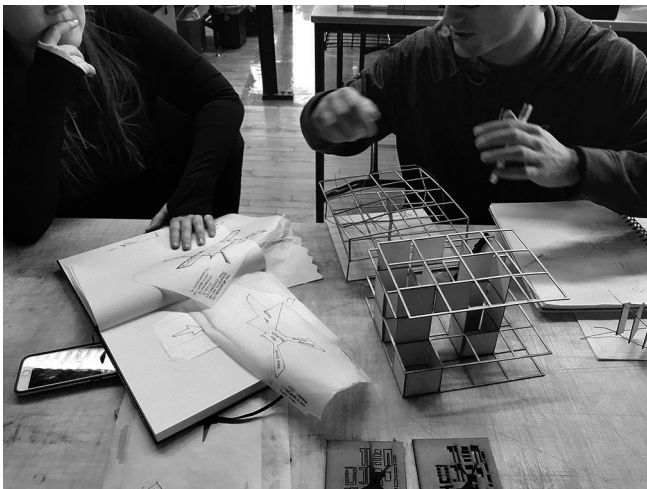


Figure 3: Student discussion with the *Trading Projects* studio.

By the midpoint of a typical semester under the *Trading Projects* pedagogy, any given project in the studio represents the cumulative effort of at least three students, having been exchanged at least twice. In this way, every project is seen to result as a consequence of the collective students’ varying interests and skills. One student’s focus may fall aside as the project changes ownership and a new set of priorities are brought to bear, and gaps in one student’s knowledge are compensated for by the subsequent work of others.

Repeated exchanges offer the opportunity for students to test their skills in the context of a unique form of critique. Students, knowing that their work is to be exchanged, tend to be systematic and thorough in their work, anxious that no obvious mismatches or gaps should be present (and hence subject to critique by their successor). In this way, the students learn to identify their own relative strengths and weaknesses, and learn how to better prepare their work for the next exchange.

The *Trading Projects* studio promotes specific kinds of translations. Each student, upon inheriting a project from another student, is obligated to read the previous student’s work and to translate it into their own thinking.

The *Trading Projects* pedagogy also gives rise to critical questions of ownership. The question of who owns a project, and who is the authority of signification, in turn bear upon questions of who decides whether a given interpretation is legitimate or correct. The questions of ownership and legitimacy extend also to the artifacts the students create. Who, for example, is to decide whether *this* artifact or *that* one is meaningful with respect to the interpretation and/or future direction of a project? Yet, these issues are not absent from typically structured studios; it is simply characteristic of the *Trading Projects* model that they are foregrounded.

The *Trading Projects* pedagogy may be summarized as follows:

1. A studio project is assigned. (For example, “Design a Border Crossing Station.”)
2. Students meet regularly with the instructor in small groups.
3. Every two or three weeks, a review discussion occurs at which the students exchange projects with each other.

ASSESSMENT

Both pedagogies raise unique opportunities for assessment. Syllabus language in both pedagogies notes that “projects are not associated with individual authorship, but artifacts are. Thus, individual grades are assessed with reference to actual artifacts produced, not on a by-project basis.” In this way, our assessment role as instructors involves reviewing the body of work produced by a student over the course of a semester, irrespective of the specific project the student was investigating.

As a general rule, students are required to submit new iterations and progress work on a weekly basis. New iterations are expected to exhibit high-quality work produced in quantity, including specific development in drawings and models, and as appropriate, full-scaled and scaled investigations, on a regular basis. Assessment also accounts for student engagement



Figure 2: Student work carried out in a *Shifting Allegiances* studio of the topic of Responsive Skins.

in critical discussion, judged as to its contribution to the development of the studio work as a whole.

The graduate students working in the *Shifting Allegiances* pedagogy are required to exhibit both thoroughness and robustness of the research work that they share with the studio; moreover, they are asked to clearly articulate the basis for their research, and to evaluate their peers for contributions to group work.

CONCLUSIONS

In both pedagogies, as students playfully and deliberately cycle between projects, they also adapt ideas from each other. We have found under both pedagogies that simultaneous individual and cooperative work tends to build more conducive and productive social structures than in the conventional studio pedagogy.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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ENDNOTES

1. Author Christenson has written about the *Trading Projects* pedagogy elsewhere. See Mike Christenson, "Scripting Parasites," in *Unconventional Computing: Design Methods for Adaptive Architecture*, ed. Rachel Armstrong and Simone Ferracina (Toronto: Riverside Press, 2014), and in Mike Christenson, *Beginning Design Technology* (London: Routledge, 2015).