

Cesar A. Cruz
Statement of Teaching Philosophy

My teaching experience includes two and a half years at the University of New Mexico as a graduate assistant for the architecture school's three-course building structures sequence. Among my duties in this role, I regularly tutored students in both small group and one-on-one situations. Next, at the University of Illinois I was a teaching assistant for three semesters for a required, graduate-level, architectural history and theory course. In this role I led weekly discussion sections where we covered a vast array of architectural theory. I also lectured on critical regionalism and architectural phenomenology before the consolidated lecture class. Both my discussion sections and lectures were highly regarded by the students.

In terms of teaching studios, I am currently an instructor for a beginning design studio at the University of New Mexico's School of Architecture and Planning. Also, during my time as a doctoral student I made it a priority to maintain close ties with the architecture and landscape architecture studios in Illinois. During that time I served as a guest studio critic and desk critic numerous times each semester. In the final year of my doctoral studies I did the same in New Mexico. The studio culture and environment is one with which I am very familiar and comfortable. It is also an environment where I relish having one-on-one and group discussions with students in order to integrate building structures, theory, history, technology, sustainability, and other subjects into the architectural design process.

In both New Mexico and Illinois I took great pride in making two generally unpopular and difficult subjects – building structures and architectural theory – not only easier to understand but also a rewarding experience. I have been able to do this by employing a conversational teaching style based largely on the Socratic Method. Through this style I am able to build a rapport with students, which immediately aids in the learning process. My style has benefitted me in every one of my teaching experiences – in class lectures, seminar discussions, design studios, and one-on-one tutoring sessions. But more importantly, this style allows each student to have a voice in my classes.

I can best illustrate my approach through an example. In one of my discussion sections in Illinois I had a student named Roberto (a pseudonym). On the first day of class, Roberto arrived a few minutes early, so I began a conversation with him. Initially I thought that Roberto, like me, was from Puerto Rico. Roberto is actually the son of Mexican immigrants. To my great surprise, Roberto also informed me that he comes from the south side of Chicago, that is, that part of the city that historically and nationally has been known and is still known today as an economically depressed and high crime area. Over subsequent discussions I found that Roberto has a strong interest in architecture's ability to strengthen communities through infrastructure building and revitalizing low-income areas. Throughout the semester Roberto and I built a rapport such that he became a regular contributor to the class discussions. He and I also spoke regularly about the class material, assignments, and upcoming exams.

Roberto's case is but one example. I apply this approach with as many students – young men and women of many different backgrounds – as possible. I begin by engaging them in very casual, very light conversation as they enter the classroom and find their seats, and as they sometimes linger when they are leaving the class. I do this because I believe that as an instructor you set the tone for the successful conduct of your class with your very first interaction with each individual student. Thus this simple technique puts students at ease and sets a tone so that they feel more comfortable contributing to class discussions or replying to questions during a lecture. During class discussions I begin with basic questions related to the class material. This enables students to easily contribute to the discourse. Then with leading questions I slowly coax them into more in-depth discussions. Along the way I pose alternative viewpoints on the class topics. I encourage the students to formulate and to express informed opinions, and to discuss and challenge each other's positions.

During lectures, when I am talking about a particular building, I may begin the discussion by asking, “Is anyone familiar with this building?” or “Has anyone ever visited this building?” These simple prompts are the initial invitations for a student to share their personal reflections on that building. With successive questions, before anyone has even realized it, I have been able to steer the conversation to talking about important architectural issues related to that building. Now the discussion over issues can extend to the wider lecture audience. The monotony of the lecture has been interrupted. I am not the only one speaking. I have engaged the students, singly at first and then to an ever increasing group of contributors. And in the course of this event, together we have advanced our understanding of architecture.

In the context of an architectural design studio or studio critique, the one-on-one student-teacher interaction is even more crucial. As such the burden on the instructor in guiding their students towards a final, quality design project is even greater. Here I make an even more concerted effort to elicit from each student their design goals, inspirations, and baseline knowledge. Knowing those things I can then steer them towards historical and contemporary precedents, influential ideas or concepts, and multiple design approaches and perspectives that will add to their depth of knowledge and aid in their design process. I believe that there all kinds of architectural audiences for all kinds of different works of architecture. So my intention in studio is not to impart to the students my design preferences. It is rather to help make each student’s project better within their vision and intent for the design.

All of these techniques help me to get to know my students as individuals. It grants me a window into their backgrounds, interests, motivations, and aspirations. And knowing them better – where they come from, where they have been, and what their future plans are – helps me to tailor class discussions or lectures to include references to famous works of architecture or places that they may be familiar with or are interested in. This has the effect of further piquing their interests when I present new, more challenging class material throughout the semester. It also helps me to gauge how well each student is assimilating the class material. Then, if I feel that a student needs extra instruction, I can comfortably approach that student and offer to help them on an individual basis or in small study groups.

My teaching style has been especially helpful in teaching students from many different backgrounds, cultures, and nationalities. In New Mexico there are substantial Latino and Native American student populations. At the University of Illinois, I was pleased to find myself among one of the largest international student populations in the United States. As such, I regularly taught students from China, India, Iran, Bangladesh, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Sri Lanka.

In all cases my objective as a teacher is to impart a lifelong curiosity about the built environment. I believe that this curiosity should go beyond the facts surrounding architecture history, the field’s theoretical underpinnings, and its design processes and techniques. It should also extend to a set of critical skills that they can apply in their professional lives. These skills include a depth of knowledge of their field, a desire to approach relevant professional questions and issues through multiple and often competing perspectives, and the ability to formulate and articulate their own stance on those questions and issues.

In conclusion, my primary goal in pursuing a doctorate in architecture has always been to teach at the university level. I enjoy teaching and find that I have become quite effective at it since I began doing so at the graduate level in 2008. I believe that my approach to students is one that is highly engaging, inclusive, flexible, and conducive to learning for very diverse student populations.