CREATING A SAFE AND EXPERIMENTAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT, IS IT SOMETHING YOU ACTIVELY DO OR DOES IT JUST HAPPEN? NO, NO, YOU DO IT ACTIVELY. SO, WHAT'S THE SECRET?

THE GRUYERE CHEESE METAPHOR. This is funny. Yes, really. The school I was working at in Bangkok had a structure that was, quite literally, cheesy—and I mean that in both senses. The director had a rather unique approach to education, basing the entire model on a Gruyère cheese metaphor. The idea was simple: a solid architecture and design program needs both the cheese—representing the core structure—and the holes—representing the gaps where unexpected things happen. The holes, in this case, were international workshops, experimental projects, and dynamic elements that kept the curriculum from becoming stale. I'll admit, I laughed a lot when I first heard the analogy. But, honestly, it worked. My role? I was more of the cheese paste, keeping things together while relentlessly advocating for the holes. Guest lecturers, unconventional formats, workshops abroad, ideas that kept students (and, frankly, staff) inspired and engaged.

LABORATORY-LIKE SPACES AND CRITICAL CITIZENS. Bringing this back to Aarhus and what you do in Studio 3—you often discuss heavy things. Yes, sometimes our discussions are quite heavy. Climate breakdown. The state of the world. The state of the profession. And you would ask, what does it have to do with providing gaps for different explorations? I think those topics are connected - climate breakdown is shaking architecture at the core, and the profession will change. In Denmark, especially, we are in quite a substantial transitional moment. Right now, I don't think there is a clear set of skills that guarantee (good) employability, or a clear set of skills that will still be relevant in 10 years from now. So it's really important, while not overlooking 'the basics', to exercise self-learning skills and critical thinking. My main pedagogical aim is for students to become creative agents, critical citizens—people engaged in the ecological transition and the urgent debates of our present and future. Architects, borrowing words from Daniel Barber, can become 'agents of decarbonisation', and for that, my focus is on creating laboratory-like spaces. Spaces where we can experiment, take risks, and confront the difficult questions. So, back to my question: creating a safe and experimental learning environment—is this something you actively do, or does it just happen? No, no, you do it actively. What's the secret? There are a few key ingredients to creating a space that feels safe, collective, engaged, and joyful.

DISMANTLING POWER STRUCTURES. First, it's about dismantling the typical power dynamics in the studio, or at least trying to. Of course, we can't completely dismantle them—I will still hold a certain level of authority, whether I want to or not, and it would be disingenuous to pretend otherwise. But what I can do is break down those structures as much as possible. This happens in different ways. Take a pin-up session, for example. Instead of the rigid, old-school setup—one that, in some institutions, hasn't changed since the 1980s—I change the layout, even just a bit. More loose chairs organisation instead of rigid lines. Rather than addressing only the student presenting, I try to make everyone in the room feel included, turning what could feel like an intimidating critique into a collective reflection. Another way to shift the dynamic? Humor. I try to shift the dynamics by starting with a silly joke, getting people to laugh, maybe even throw in something grotesque or absurd. It's amazing what a bit of ridiculousness can do to disarm tension.

SUPPORTING THEIR AGENDA. But beyond that, dismantling power structures isn't just about studio dynamics, it's about the projects themselves. My focus is on helping students develop their own agenda—and feel supported along the way. You see, we work in a studio that has an ecological focus, but what is ecology? We could say that ecology is less a word or an adjective that describe what a thing is, but more a way of looking at things in connection to each other, following their relations, across space and across time—Jussy Parikka says it very well in an article called Cartographies of Environmental Arts. Ecology is a way of thinking, a form of operation, and, therefore, many topics can be approached ecologically. It's more a 'how' rather than a 'what'. So, within the 'umbrella' brief that we propose every year, that we think resonates with urgent questions, we always leave space to empower the students' desire, to bring their interest to the table, contributing with the 'what' as we craft the 'how'. Studio 3 is experimental, and my role isn't to dictate but to unlock potential—to push students to think differently, to challenge the status quo, to dig deeper into what actually excites them. What's your research question? What fascinates you? I think this is so important! There should always be a question. As a provocation, often I say: I'm basically here to work for you. What are your concerns? Bring them up, let's look at them together. This often makes students more responsible, while also challenging the idea of expertise. For example, I won't pretend to be an expert in your fungi research—but I can offer steady methodological support. I can say: The sea is wavy, and your boat is tentative—but you can navigate in that direction. I've seen it many times, but ultimately, you have to sail the boat. And that's important—because otherwise, we forget that we're all sharing a kind of risk. I don't always have the answers. I'm not always at ease or with full knowledge of the topic. At the end of the day, my role is to help formulate questions and to make sure that your portfolio has been a tool to develop skills, discover interests and address concerns.

ENDURE FRUSTRATIONS - BE VULNERABLE - BE A CO-STUDENT (sort of). I can't just be a still recipient of knowledge—I have to be just as engaged as the students. If we're embracing an ecological and experimental approach, then we should be a bit unstable on our feet. We should be engaging with things that maybe we are not entirely comfortable with, because it's a bit outside of our knowledge comfort zone. This semester, for example, we're doing some research tackling topics where, quite honestly, I also have much to learn. And that's crucial. It keeps me driven— in a way, I'm also half a student. And that's also one way to rethink the power structure. If I'm learning alongside them, it shifts the dynamic. And, quite usefully, it also gets students to take more risks—because if I, as a tutor, put myself on the line, I hope they feel like they should, too. But this also means enduring frustration. Being a bit more vulnerable. That's part of the process. Every project has moments where you'll feel exhausted by it, where nothing seems to be working. But that's the nature of pushing beyond the safe space of the status-quo, if we recognise its shortcomings. You have to put in the work. Also, you need to realise that experimental projects might be developed with a set of hypotheses that might or might not be met. The process is part of the project, not only the result.

BALANCING STRUCTURE AND EXPERIMENTATION. So how do you balance that? How do you foster an environment where students can take risks and experiment—while also managing deadlines, keeping everything on track, and getting actual work done? Well, counterintuitive as it may sound, we provide quite a structured methodology, the 'how' I was referring to before. Think back to the Gruyère cheese metaphor—we can't leave everything open-ended. We have to be deliberate about what's structured and what's flexible. In every design brief, we carefully decide what remains open and what needs to be tightly structured. And our briefs are long, full of embedded thinking, and provide a clear framework. To balance the 'what' and the 'how' we have tried different methodologies. This semester, for example, students must write their own agenda for their project and the semester ahead, following a document that prompts them with loose questions. Every couple of weeks, they have to revisit and refine that piece of writing, tracking how their ideas evolve. With this quasi-diary process we hope to push for a more continuous critical reflection— to acknowledge their progress and their shifts in thinking.

DIFFERENT INITIATIVES. Looking back, you've developed several didactic initiatives—whether it's Entangled Maps, Radical Talks, Fire Day, The School in Real Time, or the Debriefing Zone during OPEN. You seem to experiment a lot, constantly creating opportunities for students to engage and empower themselves. What ties them all together? I'm constantly interested in different ways of approaching students—whether it's stimulating participation, encouraging feedback, creating a heightened sense of curiosity, or simply getting them to test and experiment more. Of course, not every approach makes sense in every context—it all depends on the pedagogical framework. And balance is key. Some experiments take a lot of time and energy, and you need colleagues who are willing to share the load. Antonio Bernacchi and Matiss Groskaufmanis have been great companions along the way. Are there any of these past initiatives that have been particularly close to your heart?

MID-CRITIQUE ON SITE. Thinking about special events done within the framework of the studio, this one was really fun—mid-critiques on site! The students loved it. But it took serious effort. Fortunately, my colleagues at the time, Chris Thurlbourne and Anders Kruse, were totally on board, but it was a logistical challenge and required a big effort. We basically spent two days camping, holding mid-critiques on the students' project sites, while driving a van. To keep energy levels up, we structured the days so that after every three critiques, we broke things up and ran workshops with an invited artist, Yuri Tuma, from the Institute of Postnatural Studies of Madrid. At one point, we had to do a role-playing game and act as invasive species. It was funny, but also on-theme. Did you only do it once, or have you repeated it? Just once. I tend to try things and see what works. Every project requires a different way of activating ideas. In this case, we were working in a large landscape setting, and that semester, we collaborated closely with one anthropologist, Brenda Chalfin, who was in Aarhus for a sabbatical and got so invested that she spent the whole semester with us. So, fieldwork became a key focus, and from that, the whole idea of having crits on site. We had a couple of vans loaded with student prototypes, drawings, and magnetic pins to hang drawings directly on the van. We'd drive to a specific site, unload prototypes, discuss, then pack up and move to the next one. It was a great experience.

BURNING PROTOTYPES. Oh, and then there was the burning prototypes experiment. What was that about? It was about biomaterials. One of the biggest challenges with biomaterials is fire resistance, so we invited this nerdy but really knowledgeable fire engineer to give a lecture on fire codes. Honestly, only a few really engaged with the lecture. And then we were actually burning the prototypes to try to get an empirical grip on what was presented in slides. Those tests, as you can imagine, were not really precise, but they created a lot of excitement—because, well, literally we burnt them. And that collective experience matters. It kind of brought everyone together—it became an event. That kind of collective action is important.

THE JOY OF COLLECTIVE EXPERIMENTATION. At the end of the day, these experiments are so much more fun when we do them together. And it's so important to find space for these moments of experimenting, testing, and trying—not just the stress of deadlines but the creative energy and the adrenaline that comes with explorative projects and doing something new. That's something worth celebrating.

This piece is based on a curated conversation between Alicia Lazzaroni and Ida Bjerga, conducted in March, 2025. Any added context and edits have been approved by the interviewee.

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