



Understanding Students' Experiences of Architecture and Interior Design Studios: A Qualitative Study

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Submission: August 07, 2026 Revised: August 21, 2026 Accepted: September 10, 2026 Available Online: September 25, 2026 Keywords: architectural education, interior design education, design studio, student experience, studio culture, qualitative research, thematic analysis Corresponding author: Umer Mahboob Malik Email: umer.mahboob@iac.edu.pk	The architecture and interior design studio learnings in practice are considered as unique, creative learning environments where the learners carry out experiments, work on the designs, interact with peers, is subject to criticism and contact with the professionals in the field of study. The current research studies students' experiences in the studying architecture and interior design studios with focus on the aspects of their learning as physical, social, emotional, and pedagogical sides of the environment under study. Qualitative research approach has been applied to study through semi-structured interview the students of architecture and interior design field. The selection of the participants for the study is guided by purposeful sampling technique with the aim of getting diversified information about various levels of students' education. The interview data have been analyzed by thematic analysis method with the view to revealing themes having the same characteristics of students' experiences. The study has aimed to scrutinize some issues such as studio space, comfort of spaces, collaboration, interactions between peers and teachers, creativity, workload, etc. The research is expected to present findings on the issue raised above as it would help educators, architects design better studios.

Introduction

Design studios represent an essential part of education in architecture and interior design as they present a unique environment for the students to gain creative, analytical, technical, and problem-solving skills. Unlike classical lecture-based courses, design studios use a "learning by doing" approach, where students are engaged in all aspects of their proposals through experimentation, analysis, reporting, discussions, and getting feedback (Lawson, 2004; Cennamo & Brandt, 2012). Thus, the studio becomes a physical environment for learning, course outline, and method of teaching simultaneously.

An important element of the studio approach is interaction between instructors and students at all levels of the design process. Desk critiques, discussions, reviews, juries, and presentations allow students to deliver their design ideas and get feedback on their works. Thus, critique is recognized as one of the key ways of learning and evaluation (Utaberta et al., 2013).

Similarly, the studios of the interior design field pave the road for experiential and collaborative learning. Problem-based learning in design studios, according to Asojo and Vo (2021), allows students to address real-life design problems, while they learn how to communicate effectively, collaborate with peers, compromise, and use design thinking skills. Other studies on design studio interactions confirmed that critical discussions are essential for the development of tacit design knowledge and learners' confidence. However, though learning in design studios might seem beneficial for students, their experience might be rather complicated. Assessment approaches, workload, feedback methods, relations with teachers, as well as peer collaboration and the physical studio design determine how students feel about their education. For example, Smith (2013) noted that interior design students considered assessment and grading to be important factors of their educational experience. Investigations on architecture jury systems raised similar questions about assessment and teaching.

The studio has certain physical features and also social aspects which should be taken into account since studio education means interaction between students, teachers, design activities and surrounding environment for a long time. Recently, some research has been done in the architectural colleges in Lahore which demonstrated importance of the physical (visible) factors like physical environment of education as well as the unfolding teaching techniques and learning methods from the viewpoint of students' studio learning experience. The findings show that while studying the process of studio education several elements which are not directly connected with pedagogical methods of teaching have to be observed as well (Fatima-tu-Zuhra & Iqbal, 2025).

There have been numerous studies on the issues of pedagogy, critique, assessment, and teaching within the studio environment, but it is still important to try and understand how students perceive studios. Most studies focus on the ongoing critique, assessment, or problem-based learning, as well as different strategies of teaching. Thus, more in-depth qualitative research is required to learn how students interpret the relations of the physical, social, emotional, and teaching aspects of the studio life in their own way.

Therefore, the aim of this research is to explore and investigate students' experiences in architecture and interior design studios. The focus will be made on the perception of studio culture by students, studio environment, teamwork among students, the role of teachers, design critique, studio workload, creativity, and belonging in studio.

By means of semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis, the study aims at investigating the experience of students in the studio and discovering the aspects of studio teaching, which may be both supportive, and challenging.

Literature Review

Design Studio as a Learning Environment

The design studio is the beating heart of architectural and interior design education. Unlike traditional classroom pedagogy, which focuses on imparting theoretical knowledge of design principles and processes, a studio-based approach views learning as an exploration of practice, through drawing, modelling, discussion, trial and error. Schön's (1983) notion of professional design learning as a process of 'reflection-in-action', in which designers develop knowledge while negotiating problems during the design process, resonates strongly with the studio model. Students in a design studio constantly re-evaluate and alter their assumptions and designs through negotiation with tutors and through their own practice. In this respect, a studio-based education is ideal for nurturing professional expertise, judgment, creativity and problem-solving skills.

Lawson (2004) makes a similar argument. He contends that theoretical knowledge is of limited value in design education because knowledge is acquired in practice, through reflection and experience rather than formal instruction. Cennamo and Brandt (2012) found in their survey of students and instructors that the building of knowledge in an academic design studio is dependent upon interaction, questioning, demonstration and dialogue.

Studio Culture and Students' Experiences

Studio culture includes the routines, behaviors, relationships, values, expectations and working practices that emerge in design schools. Students often spend lots of their time working in a studio, meaning that the studio becomes not only a place of learning but also a place of social interaction. Therefore, students are shaped not only by what they learn in the education system but also by the relationships they form with each other, with the educational system, with the ways of assessing their work, and the overall studio culture.

The studio environment allows students to view each other's work, discuss ideas and issues, share and develop solutions to design challenges and engage in informal learning. It can be argued that learning occurs informally in a community of practice where individuals learn from each other, developing knowledge and skills together. Wenger (1998) demonstrates how knowledge is created in a community through learning, sharing solutions, and engaging with others to solve problems. This statement is especially relevant to students studying architecture and interior design, as they learn from their peers and teachers.

Cennamo and Brandt (2012) proved that learning in academic settings is strongly related to interactions, questions, demonstrations, and discussions between students and instructors.

Student-Teacher Interaction

Interaction between students and studio instructors is among the key components of design education. Unlike traditional teaching, studio instructors work individually with students in the context of desk critiques, demonstrations, informal discussions, and design reviews. All these activities allow students to present and defend their ideas, find problems in their design, and develop new design solutions.

Cennamo and Brandt (2012) stress the importance of effective studio teaching, which is based on providing students with appropriate guidance and encouraging them to build their own design understanding. In other words, too much guidance from a teacher may result in reduced independence and initiative of students, while too little guidance may lead to teaching confusion. Thus, communication plays a critical role in effective studio teaching.

Critiques and Jury Experiences

Critique is one of the main aspects of the education process in architecture and interior design. During the course, students are frequently asked to describe their ideas to the instructors, peers, and external juries and obtain feedback about their work, decisions, and potential improvements. Utberta et al. (2013) note that critique sessions can be seen as an essential learning experience that allows students to assess their work according to criteria and deepen their understanding of the problems they solve.

Nevertheless, students can have various experiences, ranging from obtaining useful insights to feeling confused or even under pressure when receiving feedback. Indeed, ambiguous or overly judgmental comments might hinder the learning process and lead to negative experiences. According to Salama and El-Attar (2010), the educational and communicative dimensions of architectural juries require students' special attention.

Similarly, assessment is an essential element of interior design education, and students' attitudes towards grades can impact their learning outcomes. For instance, Smith (2013) found that students' perceptions and responses to assessment practices shape their approaches to learning and professional development. Accordingly, critique and assessment practices are significant contexts within the framework of a studio-based learning environment that deserve special consideration.

Peer Collaboration and Informal Learning

Peer interaction is another essential learning feature in a studio culture. Students engage in discussions about design matters, observe each other's work, share techniques and know-how, and give and receive informal feedback. Such interactions can be highly beneficial for establishing collaborative and socially engaged learning practices.

In particular, a student's collaborative experience is critical for their socialization as a designer. Problem-based learning, for instance, allowed interior design students to learn from each other while developing their communication and collaboration skills and approaching actual design challenges (Asojo & Vo, 2021).

Conversely, it is also necessary to acknowledge the competitive aspect of the studio culture. Understanding how students balance collaboration and competition is key to evaluating social interaction in the studio context.

Physical Studio Environment

The physical qualities of design studios could also affect students' experiences. Studio learning often includes long sessions of drawing, model making, computer tasks, presentations, and group discussions, so spatial layout, furniture, lighting, air circulation, acoustics, technology, storage, and opportunities for interaction could influence how students use and interpret their studios.

Research examining architectural studios in Lahore has been emphasizing that both tangible characteristics of the physical environment and intangible aspects of teaching and learning influence students' studio experiences (Fatima-tu-Zuhra & Iqbal, 2025). Consequently, the physical studio should be perceived as an active component of the educational experience, rather than only a place where teaching takes place.

Creativity and Design Development

Developing creativity is among the primary aims of architectural and interior design education. In a studio culture, students are faced with open-ended problems for which they are expected to come up with multiple alternatives and defend their own decisions. Schön (1983) asserts that designers acquire knowledge through reflection on their own design activities, which takes the form of a dialogue between the designer and the design situation. Therefore, in order to learn from failures as well as successes, students need to be given enough room to experiment within their designs while also receiving the right guidance.

Workload and Emotional Experience

Design studio education can be very demanding in terms of academic intensity since students are required to constantly produce drawings, models, presentations, reports, and other forms of project output. The iterative nature of the course often involves continuous modification of assignments based on faculty feedback and studio jury reviews.

These factors can contribute to the emotional dimension of the design studio learning outcome. Students can feel confident, excited, insecure, challenged, or dissatisfied throughout the process. By understanding their views, it will be possible to see how the studio pedagogy can support academic intensity while providing an appropriate learning environment.

Sense of Belonging and Studio Community

The studio can be a social community in which students build relationships with their peers and instructors. Wenger's (1998) idea of communities of practice is based on the premise that belonging and participating are closely linked to learning, as people generate and negotiate knowledge while engaging with others who share activities and interests.

In architecture and interior design, students often work with the same peers for an extended period of time. It can help foster friendships, collaboration, and the exchange of knowledge, and professional identity. Therefore, a studio community might support student engagement and sense of belonging in their academic communities.

Research Gap

Existing literature highlights the significance of studio pedagogy, critique, assessment, peer relations, creativity, and physical environment (Cennamo & Brandt, 2012; Smith, 2013; Utaberta et al., 2013; Asojo & Vo, 2021). However, many works analyze these elements in isolation, rather than exploring how students perceive them in the general context of studio life.

Moreover, the architecture and interior design students both undergo similar but different studio-based educational processes due to the difference in their discipline-specific practices, project requirements, spatial concerns, and modes of representation. There is a necessity for qualitative analysis allowing students to represent their voices.

Thus, the current study implements a qualitative method to explore students' lived experiences in relation to the interconnected physical, social, emotional, and pedagogical aspects of architecture and interior design studio life. Particular attention will be paid to the studio culture, physical environment, student-teacher relationships, peer collaborations, critiques and juries, creativity, workload, and sense of belonging.

Research Methodology

Research Approach and Design

This study employed a qualitative research design to understand students' experiences of architecture and interior design studios. A phenomenological study was chosen because the study aimed to understand students' perceptions of their experiences in a studio. A qualitative study was considered appropriate to this study because it allows researchers to examine phenomena that are not open to measurement or that require an in-depth exploration of meaning and social interactions (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Study Participants

The pool of participants consisted of undergraduate students, who studied architecture and interior design and had the relevant experience of studio-based learning. Students of different academic levels were recruited to secure a diverse participant pool with different perspectives on the studio culture, physical environment, didactic components such as communication with instructors, design critiques, juries, collaboration with peers, level of workloads, creativity, and sense of community.

The initial goal was to recruit 15-20 students, but the ultimate number depended on the quality and volume of information gathered during the individual interviews.

Sampling Strategy

A purposive sampling technique was employed to identify participants who had relevant experience of design studio education. Purposive sampling is often used in qualitative research since it allows researchers to choose information-rich participants who can provide detailed insights into the phenomenon of interest (Patton, 2015).

The key inclusion criteria were based on the participants' current enrollment in an architecture or interior design program and completion of at least one design studio course.

Data Collection

The author decided to conduct a study of his own, using a similar research methodology. The data was collected using semi-structured and face-to-face interviews, which were chosen for their ability to create a common basis for all participants. Though the questions are fixed, they allow a respondent to describe their experience in detail and for the researcher to ask clarifying questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The interview guide addressed major areas identified through the literature review, including:

- physical studio environment and facilities;
- studio culture and learning experience;
- student-teacher interaction;
- peer collaboration;
- critique and jury experiences;
- creativity and design development;
- workload and emotional experiences; and
- sense of belonging within the studio community.

Interviews are expected to take place between 25 and 40 minutes. Interviews can be audio-recorded with the participants' consent and will be transcribed for analysis. In addition, notes will be taken, when appropriate, to record observations.

Data Analysis

Interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis, with adherence to the procedure described by Braun and Clarke (2006). In particular, the steps included becoming familiar with the interview transcripts, initial coding of the data, identification of preliminary themes, theme reduction, definition and name selection, and final interpretation preparation.

The analysis followed an inductive approach that allowed themes to emerge from the data rather than being dictated by the researcher at the outset. At the same time, the concepts uncovered in the literature review served as sensitizing areas for examining the participants' experiences. As a result, both anticipated and unanticipated aspects of students' studio experiences were revealed.

Trustworthiness of the Study

The quality of the qualitative study was evaluated using such criteria as credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was achieved through extensive interviews and comparison of similarities and

differences of experiences. The audit trail was maintained by storing interview transcripts, decisions about coding, and development of themes. The study's authenticity and trustworthiness were increased because of recruiting participants from different programs: interior design and architecture, and at different academic levels. Additionally, descriptive accounts of the study and the participants were provided to help the readers determine whether the research is transferable or not.

Ethical Considerations

The participants' recruitment to the study was voluntary. They were all informed of the goals of the research and their rights to discontinue participation without any negative consequences. Consent forms were also obtained from the participants before the start of the interviews. In the final version of the paper, the respondents are cited as P01, P02, and P03, where the numbers stand for the code that was given to the individual by the researchers upon the start of the collaboration. The interviews were recorded, and the materials were subject to confidentiality, and solely used for the research purposes.

Findings and Thematic Analysis

The thematic analysis of the provided interview data was conducted using students' experiences of architecture and interior design studios as the main point of discussion. The data were analyzed using the method proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Specifically, the coding process included identification of patterns of meaning at the initial level of analysis. Following this procedure, six themes were determined, including (1) studio collaboration, (2) physical environment, (3) instructor consultation, (4) critique and jury, (5) creativity, and (6) workload, pressure, and community.

Studio as a Collaborative Learning Environment

Students saw their design studio as more interactive than a traditional classroom. Discussing ideas with peers, observing their work, giving and receiving informal feedback, and sharing technical expertise were seen as important aspects of studio learning. The participants described learning from each other while working on drawings, models, presentations, and design concepts.

"Sometimes discussing the project with classmates gives me another viewpoint to view the design problem from." (P04)

This study revealed that, apart from formal instruction, learning takes place in the studio through extensive informal interaction between students.

Physical Environment and Spatial Comfort

The participants identified the studio's physical environment as one of the factors affecting their learning. The studio's lighting, air, furniture, workspace arrangement, soundproofing, technology, and layout were linked to their comfort and productivity.

"When the studio had sufficient lighting, space to work and comfortable furniture, I could work uninterruptedly and get more done." (P07)

The students associated the flexibility of the workspace with their ability to pursue their design process individually or collectively. Lack of space and comfort was detrimental to their willingness to stay in the studio.

Instructor Interaction and Feedback

Interaction with the instructors in the studio was one of the key themes that emerged from the study. The participants discussed their positive experiences with teachers who provided adequate feedback on their performance while giving them enough space to explore their creativity and develop their ideas.

"The most useful feedback is when the teacher tells you what he/she thinks and leaves the rest to you to decide." (P11)

The students claimed that they received the most value from feedback that prompted them to think through the issues rather than simply telling them what to do. This theme encapsulates the main pedagogical hypothesis that guided the research.

Critique and Jury Experiences

Critiques and juries were both described as integral but sometimes intimidating aspects of the studio education experience. Students noted that presentations provided opportunities to develop and articulate their design decisions to multiple audiences

while also exposing them to a variety of professional perspectives. However, participants also described feeling intimidated by the prospect of formal juries.

“The jury can be stressful, but it also teaches us how to explain the reasons behind our design decisions.” (P03)

Participants noted that they particularly valued feedback that was specific and delivered in a respectful manner that supported their design development. The study’s findings indicate that juries can be powerful learning events if critiques are framed in ways that recognize and build on participants’ design process.

Creativity and Design Development

Students perceived the studio environment as a stimulating one for creativity, experimentation and independent thinking. Participants described design as an iterative process, including exploring possibilities, receiving feedback and revisions and further developing the concept.

“My first idea is rarely my final design. Studio feedback enables me to explore different directions for the concept.” (P15)

Students appreciated the opportunity to be able to experiment with different approaches rather than looking for the one right answer. Therefore, the findings suggest that learning within a studio environment can support creativity by providing both guidance and room for exploration.

Workload, Emotional Pressure, and Sense of Belonging

Workload was one of the central themes that emerged from participants’ descriptions of their studio practice. Intensive work on drawings, models, presentations, and revisions characterized their experiences, especially in relation to submission and jury periods.

At the same time, students also spoke of the studio as a place where strong social bonds could be formed through collective experiences.

“Studio work can become exhausting near a jury, but working together with classmates makes the experience easier and creates a sense of community.” (P09)

This theme, therefore, reflects the dual nature of the studio culture, and the potential for it to both challenge participants and support them by generating feelings of connectedness.

Discussion

The results of this study indicate that students’ perceptions of architecture and interior design studios are multi-faceted since the factors that influence their experiences there are interrelated. This means that, in addition to providing a space for constructing design projects, the studio is considered through the lenses of pedagogy, physical environment, social interaction, creativity, and affect.

Collaborative Studio Learning

Peer collaboration became a significant part of students’ studio practice. Students appreciated the informal discussions with classmates, observing each other’s work, and sharing design expertise. This observation aligns with Wenger’s (1998) hunch about communities of practice, where learning emerges from participation and collaboration. It also resonates with Asojo and Vo’s (2021) study, which revealed that cooperative and problem-based learning practices in interior design education could promote communication competencies, teamwork, and design-thinking skills. Therefore, based on the research, it is possible to conclude that informal peer learning practices should be acknowledged and incorporated into studio pedagogy.

Physical Studio Environment

Students related lighting, ventilation, furniture, workspace, acoustics, and technological facilities with their comfort and the possibility to remain engaged in studio activities. This implies that the physical studio is not only a supportive context for learning but also contributes to students’ overall educational experience. This finding coincides with research that underlines the importance of both tangible and intangible characteristics of architectural studio environments for student learning (Fatima-tu-

Zuhra & Iqbal, 2025). Thus, providing comfortable, flexible, and appropriately equipped studios might facilitate both individual and collaborative design activities.

Instructor Interaction and Feedback

Constructive instructor feedback emerged as one of the key components of studio learning. Students appreciated getting feedback that challenged them to acknowledge their weaknesses while at the same time not giving up on their design visions. This outcome aligns with the study by Cennamo and Brandt (2012), which recommends appropriate types of guidance and dialogues in studio knowledge construction. It also resonates with Schön's (1983) assertion of reflective practice, which entails the role of feedback in the cyclical learning process of "doing and talking" about action. By these insights, studio instructors should foster reflective practices by learners instead of directing them on what to do or not do in their design processes.

Critiques and Jury Experiences

Critiques and juries were seen by students as beneficial for developing presentation, communication and design-justification skills, despite the pressures and uncertainties involved. Similar findings have been reported in studies exploring the role of critique and assessment in design education (Smith, 2013; Utberta et al., 2013). Utberta et al. (2013) specifically highlight critique as an important learning and assessment process for architectural studio. The current findings suggest that juries are likely to be more educationally productive if feedback is perceived as specific, respectful, transparent and developmental rather than a final assessment.

Creativity and Design Development

Students described design development as iterative process of exploring and rethinking their options, seeking and incorporating feedback and experimenting. This resonates strongly with Schön's (1983) notion of design as a reflective-in-action process and Lawson's (2004) assertion that a significant part of design knowledge is acquired through practice. Therefore, the studio culture should create an environment in which students are encouraged to seek alternatives, experiment, make mistakes, rethink their approach and revise their proposals. The process of design thinking should be iterative and non-linear and should not be prescribed by overly prescriptive instruction. At the same time, appropriately targeted guidance may be required to allow for truly independent design thinking.

Workload, Emotional Experience and Sense of Belonging

The results also demonstrated another aspect of the duality of the studio culture. Students reported having intense workloads and stress associated with the submission and jury assessments. At the same time, they mentioned having positive and supportive relationships with their peers in the studio environment. This outcome corresponds with Wenger's (1998) proposition of the community of practice, in which membership attribution facilitates learning and social identity. From this finding, it could be suggested that students' sense of belonging could be a critical source of peer support, especially when they are highly stressed with their projects.

Overall, the results of the study demonstrated that good architecture and interior design studios go beyond good syllabi. In particular, the findings indicated that students' peer relationships, instructor feedback, working conditions, critique practices, opportunities for autonomy, and studio culture are key to their learning experiences in the environment. As such, the review recommends a student-centered approach to teaching in the architecture and interior design studios that seek to promote collaboration, feedback, creativity, working conditions, and sense of belonging alongside the maintenance of high academic standards.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate students' perceptions of architecture and interior design studios. The article reveals the physical, pedagogical, social, creative, and emotional aspects of design education. It demonstrates how students study the design course in the environment of others and how they acquire knowledge through interaction, experiments, criticism, collaboration, and self-development.

The six main themes identified in the article are collaborative learning, physical environment, instructors and feedback, critique and juries, creativity and design, and workload, emotions, and sense of community. The themes demonstrate students' perceptions of the studio and the learning environment in general. The structure of the design education course and socialization processes influence the students' academic outcomes and design skills development.

Students appreciate the collective work and interaction with others and the ability to receive feedback from the instructors. At the same time, students need to be comfortable and capable of working individually. The article shows that students need each other for support, inspiration, and collaboration. Critique and juries help students improve their communication skills, learn to respond to criticism, and increase professional competencies. However, unclear feedback and overly critical juries decrease academic performance and confidence.

Finally, the high workload of the studio course challenges students, and their social connections and the sense of the design community provide the necessary support. A supportive learning environment should be created to ensure the students' achievements and abilities in the design field. This study concludes that a professional learning environment should combine high-quality education and socialization to strengthen the students' skills and competencies, develop creativity, and support their confidence and independence.

Recommendations

Architecture and interior design schools should foster collaborative studio environments, while also providing the space, resources, and flexibility needed to develop individual design capabilities. Studios should be supported by appropriate lighting, ventilation, ergonomic furniture, technology, presentation areas, model-making resources, working arrangements,

Studio instructors should provide constructive and developmental feedback, while also providing the necessary independence for students to explore alternative design options. Critiques and juries should be seen as instructional opportunities, with clear evaluation criteria, and appropriate communication. Institutions should also consider studio workloads and submission schedule to ensure academic standards are not compromised. Peer learning, discussion, mentoring, and collaboration should also be used to support students' sense of belonging and community within the studio environment.

Limitations

The qualitative nature of the study presented is the limitation that makes it difficult to generalize the obtained results to a broader population of architecture and interior design students. This study's participants may differ in numerous ways, including the university they attend, the education level, cultural background, teaching methods, and individual experiences. Moreover, the analysis based on an interview relies on the perspectives and memories of participants about their studio practice.

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