

Digital practices: developing digital literacies in open studio teaching for the post-studio art world

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Biography

Dr Daniel McKewen is a Brisbane-based visual artist and academic whose practice investigates the intersections of contemporary art, popular culture, and the entertainment and financial industries. He appropriates elements from screen culture in order to examine and critique how these institutional structures operate culturally, socially, and politically. In 2013 Daniel was awarded his Doctorate of Philosophy from Queensland University of Technology. His artwork is held in private collections and has been exhibited nationally and internationally, including in *NEW14* at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, and *You Imagine What You Desire* at the 19th Biennale of Sydney.

Abstract:

The teaching of contemporary art practice at an undergraduate level presents a complex web of challenges for the academic team involved. Contemporary student expectations and engagement, as well as institutional constraints can leave educators at cross-purposes, particularly with regard to the digital aspects of creative practice. While an open studio model is uniquely suited to teaching visual art in a post-medium environment, there also remains a responsibility to explicate to students how their practices can develop and adapt in the ever-shifting, laptop-centric, post-studio reality they will inhabit as professional artists.

This case study will describe a pedagogical strategy of cross-fertilizing the oft-separated digital and analogue streams of studio practice. It will emphasise the value of integrating practical digital skills development into a post-medium open studio teaching program and how this approach enables students to see the entirety of their studio activities rhizomatically. Team teaching strategically enhances this approach to learning through emphasising a dialogical model of pedagogy that folds together skills development, conceptual/contextual/historical issues, and peer critique into intensive digital studio teaching sessions. This strategy implemented over the course of their study can habituate students into thinking holistically about their practice, and fosters a more creatively generative, critically engaged, and resilient student-artist who can resourcefully adapt to the post-studio art world.

Keywords: post-studio; open studio; laptop studio; creative practice; digital literacy; digital studio; rhizome; pedagogy; contemporary art

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Introduction

In her 2010 essay *The Function of the Studio (when the studio is a laptop)* Caitlin Jones deftly identifies the key benefits and problems facing students and teachers of contemporary art when critically and creatively exploring the relationship between traditional and digital media. As a response to Daniel Buren's (1979) seminal essay on the studio's ossifying effect, Jones points out that the practice (and teaching) of art-making currently faces an on-going responsibility to adapt to the constantly shifting sands of art's digital terrain:

Traditional "open studio" conventions are rendered obsolete as, by its very nature, the laptop studio can always be "open." The "post studio" laptop studio also significantly disrupts the temporal process of the traditional studio—moments of research, production and dissemination are continually evolving and reorganizing. (Jones 2010)

In working within this laptop culture, students are working in "reaction to expanded cultural platforms writ large" (Jones 2010), and it remains incumbent upon higher education art schools to make this situation explicit to students and structure their studio programs accordingly. Doing so ensures that students graduating from a studio art course are best prepared to consciously embrace and exploit the myriad of digital and analogue activities and resources available to them as creative practitioners.

This case study acts as a reflection on how an open studio model of teaching visual art can respond to Jones' provocation that the notion of the open studio is essentially obsolete. It will describe a pedagogical strategy of cross-fertilizing the oft-separated digital and analogue streams of studio practice. It will emphasise the value of integrating practical digital skills development into a post-medium open studio teaching program that encourages students to see the entirety of their studio activities (and indeed their subsequent professional lives) as a rich terrain of formal, material, conceptual and contextual relationships to be explored. Pedagogically this approach to learning is strategically enhanced through team teaching that brings together the different skillsets and experiences of the artist-teacher team to open up a dialogue around conceptual, contextual, and historical issues, in symbiosis with technical skills development. Learning this way habituates students into thinking holistically about their practice and fosters a more creatively generative, resourceful, responsive, digitally literate, and critically engaged student-artist (Salazar 2014, Raqs Media Collective 2009, Miles 2006).

Open studio and the rhizome

The Queensland University of Technology (QUT) Visual Art course is built around six core 'Studio Practice' double-credit-point units that run each semester of an undergraduate's BFA degree. The nomenclature and student workload of these units is reflective of the primary importance that the degree places on each student developing their own art practice. From the outset of first-year studies, the teaching team aims to empower students to think of their various creative activities as a practice and further, that all of their studio-based endeavors are connected or rhizomatic in nature (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). This emphasis rests upon the foundation of QUT's 'open studio' model of art teaching. Rather than the traditional medium-specific art school model, where students are separated into disciplines of painting, sculpture, print-making etcetera, QUT's model is non-disciplinary. This is the core value of QUT's approach to teaching visual art; an a-disciplinary, open studio environment that prioritizes heuristic learning. This idea is connected to various educational theories including 'experiential learning' (Fry and Kolb 1979) 'constructionism' (Papert and Harel 1991), 'choice-based learning' (Douglas and Jaquith 2009), and 'learning as a network' (Chatti 2010). In drawing from these pedagogical models, the open studio empowers students with the agency to experiment and explore any and all mediums as they develop as artists. The emphasis is on the conceptual underpinnings of each student's interests and how these ideas can and should change by experimenting with numerous different mediums in a critically rich environment of exchange with their peers and staff.

While this approach to teaching art practice is quite unique in the Australian tertiary sector in the way it prepares students for the realities of professional practice, it is not without pedagogical challenges common to the field worldwide. Many of these challenges have been effectively outlined by Salazar (2013) in her survey of 21st century tertiary art teaching. Of particular relevance to this paper are two of Salazar's key points; the need to pedagogically structure the creative process (particularly for first year students), and the need to deliver on the often divergent ideas held by teachers and students of what constitutes key artistic skills. Firstly, at QUT it is essential that the open studio program structures the creative process in a way that encourages our students to be receptive to the self-directed demands of the course. These are often overwhelming for students' existing creative experiences making them resistant to the open-ness and benefits of the open studio model. With this in mind, our evolving pedagogical approach, responding directly to the notion of the laptop studio, aims to structure the creative process by encouraging students to understand art practice as a rhizome of creative and critical activities that occupy the same areas of "research, production and dissemination" that Jones (2010) identified. The learning environment provided and studio activities undertaken must allow them to reorient themselves not just to the broader contexts

of art in general, but also to the shifts in their own approaches to making art. Secondly, alongside this reorientation, there also remains the need for the open studio course to provide students with opportunities to develop practical studio-based skills. In response to this, studio practice units provide numerous modules focused on material processes that incorporate traditional studio and workshop skills. However, more importantly it makes apparent the importance of utilising their 'laptop studio', their home to both creative thinking and social connectivity, as the central conceptual hub of their art making practices.

Digital Labs

One of the modules that aid in this scaffolding are the 'Digital Labs' that are included as part of the studio practice units in each semester of the degree. Initially these were weekly one-hour tutorials where students were guided through learning various digital skills in still and moving image making, and audio and visual editing processes. While these tutorials were useful in helping students with pure skill-acquisition, I recognised how they also limited students from thinking holistically about their practice or coherently conceiving of the digital labs as being a larger part of it. Most students struggled to incorporate the creative potential of these digital activities into their practice. The irony of this did not escape me; particularly that it sat in opposition to the common rhetoric of millennial students as being 'digital natives' (Prensky 2001). In fact, my experience was, and still is, that unless it is consciously incorporated into the open studio program – and despite easy and free access to professional-level creative software – most visual art students only use digital media in a transitory fashion and often for exclusively social means.

A problem of connectivity

The reasons that students failed to conceive of the digital labs as an integral part of their studio practice were two-fold. Firstly, there was the physical distance between the studio, which they considered the principal site of making, and the computer labs situated on the other side of the campus. Secondly the labs were often timetabled on a separate day to students' assigned 'studio-day', leaving students simply to conceive of them as purely skill-acquisition times; and often something with which their current analogue creative pursuits did not align. As a class, the creative digital activity was part of a checklist of things for students to execute by rote (for example, 'make twelve Photoshop images'), and as a tutor I became simply a digital problem-solver to turn to when (for example) a student's video file format was incompatible with their software. While this bifurcation of studio and digital teaching was obviously compounded by the time-and-place problems discussed above, the problem was pedagogical as well as practical. As a teaching staff, we had to conceptually as well as physically relocate the site of learning to integrate the potential of digital technologies

alongside the traditional approaches to making art. In terms of Jones' provocation outlined in the introduction, I and other studio staff felt we had a pedagogical obsolescence; there was a gap between how the open studio model was operating and its disconnectedness from the potential of the laptop studio. In Salazar's pedagogical terms, the digital labs needed to address and model how digital activities can enable connective and rhizomatic creative thinking, allowing students to develop the key skill of structuring their own creative process.

Considering this studio-laptop gap, it seemed to me that the real problem was that students' entire cultural and social lives hinge upon the digital (read: online) world, but the structure of the open studio model lagged behind this socio-cultural shift and didn't identify the creative possibilities inherent in this digital activity. Further to this recognition, the separation of lab and studio activity excluded the creative possibilities between the analogue studio processes and digital activities they were engaging with. Put plainly, students spend all day in front of screens in one way or another, and yet the open studio program didn't help them to take creative advantage of this.

Digital studio labs

The main facet of the solution to the digital lab problem has been one of replacing short skill-based lab sessions with wholly integrated studio lab sessions. These run concurrent to allocated studio time, with separate cohorts of students rotating through the semester in an intensive mode for three-hour blocks. These sessions are designed to reflect the usual studio sessions where skills development, practical application, reflection and critique take place, effectively turning the digital labs into digital *studio* labs. The students bring in to these sessions all types of work in process and states of progress and test out new possibilities for 2D, 3D work and time-based work using digital techniques. This strategy has significantly increased the capacity of students to envisage new and unexpected possibilities for all aspects of their practice.

Digital sketching

Effectively, this longer class time allows for a pedagogical rhythm of demonstration-practice-demonstration-practice-demonstration-practice, rather than the 'info-dump' approach that the shorter class time necessitated, and which often overwhelmed less digitally adept students. This structure has been adapted from a common life-drawing class structure where each new pose of the life-model triggers a new five, ten, or twenty-minute 'sketch'. In this case, short bursts of digital skill demonstration are followed by student 'sketching' sessions. The important effect of this digital 'sketching' is that it emphasises the potential of digital processes to quickly create a myriad of creative outcomes. Flowing on from this, the 'sketching' class structure

foregrounds the iterative potential of digital making that is essential for students to understand as a key process across all of their studio activities. Building on previous sketches in an iterative way and saving varied versions of the file as they make changes, they develop an array of creative possibilities that can then cross-pollinate into the rest of their analogue studio activities.

This process is key to students understanding the potential of integrating the laptop studio into the traditional one. They can test out an array of aesthetic choices much faster digitally, and in turn allow these outcomes to accelerate and enhance other studio activities. This shift in approaches to making provides the key to creating the material and conceptual connectivity between analogue and digital activity, and is the primary level of digital literacy that the digital labs are intended to develop.

Team teaching

The other key facet of the digital lab solution has been a shift to a team teaching model. On a practical level, this strategy has meant that students receive more valuable direct tutor interaction from both staff members. In following the demonstration-practice-demonstration-practice rhythm described above, by having two tutors, students can more easily call upon a tutor's guidance as they sketch and experiment. While I perform the digital skill demonstrations, my teaching partner can observe and encourage students to identify practical and conceptual connections between digital processes and analogue processes, as well as contextualise the conceptual and critical possibilities between the two studio modes. Then in the practice/sketching time that follows, both teaching staff assist the students with creative decision-making and technical advice as per their analogue studio activities. The reflective group critique session that follows this sketching again emphasises the sense of continuity for the student in valuing the equivalence of both analogue and digital sites, as well as enhancing the dialogue between them. The final benefit of the team teaching model is the opportunity it presents to integrate a unified voice into the narrative of both sites of learning. Simply put, while there is obvious benefit in students hearing from different teaching voices – especially in a unit such as Studio Practice – the presence of studio staff in their laptop studio sessions creates a site of continuity for students to understand these previously separate spaces as connected. It means that conversations that begin in the analogue studio are literally continued in the laptop studio, reinforcing the essential rhizomatic connectivity of all aspects of contemporary studio practices.

Conclusion

QUT Visual Arts is still in the early stages of implementing this approach to incorporating digital processes and activities into practice based research. Despite this, already there are clear benefits to repositioning the physical, formal and conceptual status of lab based learning as an integral part of studio practices in contemporary art. This is evident in increased student in-class engagement and the array of end-of-semester folio outcomes. While it certainly develops the practical skills that students expect to learn, in rethinking the divide between new and old media and in learning from a team of teachers, the students are more fundamentally encouraged to think of their digital activities and their analogue studio processes as parts of a singular rhizome of creative practice. Enabling students to identify this rhizomatic structure is not only important in terms of empowering them to structure their own creative process but is also reflective of the central role that their creative lives has in their lives in general. The changes to the digital labs outlined above have been crucial in encouraging and increasing the number of students having a meaningful engagement with what it means to integrate digital and time-based methods of making across more traditional forms of practice. Crucially, it has also challenged students with outmoded ideas of art practice to face the digital reality of their creative futures that Caitlin Jones so succinctly discussed. That is, by making the digital lab or laptop the central site of their studio activities during their art education, students are ideally prepared for the laptop-centric, post-studio model of contemporary art practices in the real world.

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