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Title

What to take back to the studio?: Online Learning and Studio Teaching Post Pandemic

Abstract

The advantages of online learning are less obvious in art and design education than in many other higher education contexts. However, our recent experience with emergency remote teaching has compelled us to more seriously consider the potential of online learning modes for studio education as we return to campus. This paper is intended as a discussion piece to stimulate further dialogue and research around the integration of online learning in art and design studio education. It presents reflection and analysis based on the authors experience of online teaching in 2020, socialised within current pedagogical research and theory. Discussion is guided by the question 'what are the opportunities for expanded studio based teaching and learning practices to come out of our time in emergency remote teaching?' Emerging opportunities supported by the affordances of digital technologies are identified and explored including: new modes of communication that enhance studio discussion and debate; ways of documenting and communicating practice that extend the pedgogy of evidencing the learning journey; extending collaborative research processes through the collective management of research for creative practice.

Introduction

We live in a digital age that has revolutionised the way we communicate, research, create, critique, learn, play, publish and work. Exploring virtual learning environments in art and design education, conference report editor Siún Hanrahan (2009) states: 'the growing importance of ICT (Information and Communications Technology) and VLE's (Virtual Learning Environments) within contemporary design and fine art

practices pose a challenge to lecturers in design and fine art to develop their teaching practices to harness such technologies' (101). Experience working in online environments as part of a twenty-first century education is critical. As McIntyre (2007) states: 'The collaborative, communication and digital processes students learn in well-structured and convened online learning environments are themselves an embodiment of skills graduates will need to live, work, communicate and cooperate in tomorrow's (increasingly today's) world' (2).

Familiarity with how new digital technologies allow strategies, tools and environments to be established, and the selection of certain digital tools for particular pedagogical purposes (Hanrahan, 2009) are part of next steps for studio education, along with an awareness of developing research and learning from each other. Published studies that provide good detail have been appearing for some time with respect to combining on-site activities with online tasks and how to support learning with virtual tools and platforms in art and design. Masdéu and Josep (2017), for example, discuss how on-site master classes and practice reviews are combined with online brainstorming sessions, video material and presentations in a blended learning model of the Design Studio in Architecture. In their practical guide to *Embedding equality and diversity in the Curriculum: an art and design practitioners guide,* Richards and Finnigan (2015) include a case study from staff at Buckinghamshire New University that describes the creation of a 'brief for a digital age' as part of a new dissertation model. In place of a problematic 'encyclopedic text-based brief' (9) an anthology of digitally-based support materials was used: video clips featuring students and staff, audio PowerPoint presentations etc., added to when needed. They commend the use of this 'Real time rolling brief' (Richards & Finnigan, 2015, 9) to others.

Research also reports that full-time remote learning is a poor substitute for on-site learning. Bendar & Vredevoogd (2006) warn that to rely on virtual instruction poses a serious risk for studio education (2006). A recent study of by Fleischmann (2020) exploring the perspectives of students towards studying online showed that students are also sceptical about undergraduate design degrees being delivered fully online. At the same time, Fleischmann's study also reported a strong preference from students towards studying design in a blended learning mode reporting that: 'While this result highlights the aversion of design students to study fully online, it also highlights an opportunity to introduce blended learning opportunities that augment the studio environment such as video tutorials and incorporation of select social

media platforms' (52). Negative findings about outcomes in online learning tend to come from fully online courses and not from blended modes (Baum & McPherson, 2019).

Emergency Remote Teaching

What we have recently been involved in was emergency remote teaching, not online learning. In the haste to continue classes most of us didn't move to online education, we conducted traditional education at a distance. Hodges et al. describe emergency remote teaching as a temporary shift of delivery mode due to crisis circumstances that will return to its regular format once the crisis or emergency has abated (Hodges et al. 2020). Fully integrated blended learning takes careful planning and design. What is available to us, and I believe important to capture, is how responding to a crisis may have precipitated enhanced practices. In the pivot to remote learning we have observed online learning first-hand, been introduced to new tools, experimented with alternatives, learnt from our mistakes, and recognised new possibilities. It is in this context that the following reflections are offered.

Modes of communication

Studio learning is a social learning process involving formal and informal open discussion; a continuum of dialogues between participants rather than a monological approach centered on the words of the teacher underpins the studio learning culture (Danvers, 2003). One of our formal dialogical approaches is the studio critique. During our online studio time we chose to continue with our studio critique sessions using Zoom as a tool to talk live with each other online. Although the online crit was certainly a compromised situation that lacked the critical richness of in-person interactions, it did hold some surprises (for me at least). The flattened space of the Zoom sphere seemed to create an equalising effect in terms of student participation. There was a shifted social dynamic that saw more students than usual contributing to live discussions and participating using the quick reactions buttons provided by the software. The latter offered a low risk, easy way for all students to engage quickly and easily. I noticed that many more, and often quieter students, seemed more comfortable to contribute in this environment.

Research into collaborative online learning in art and design has found that online critique can lead to higher levels of participation and collaboration from students. Drawing on qualitative and quantitative data, McIntyre's (2007) summary of online courses developed at the College of Fine Arts (COFA), The University of New South

Wales, Sydney, Australia notes the opportunity to participate equally in class as an advantage of online learning, quoting student feedback in support of this. McIntyre adds that 'those whose first language is not English, or who are naturally shy, find the time to reflect upon their contributions before posting' (4). Feedback from our own rapid surveys of students during lockdown in the faculty of Creative Arts and Industries at The University of Auckland indicated that many students felt more comfortable to ask questions during online classes, especially during small group sessions. Overall, 77% of students agreed that the online learning environment allowed effective communication between teaching staff and students.

Masdéu and Josep (2017) explain that the use of blended learning does not replace face-to-face connections between teachers and students but that it does improve the overall learning experience by setting different modes of communication that offer learners the possibility of extended online discussions, complementing the activities in the studio. The integration of online formats into existing practices is one way to take advantage of these distinctive, relatively new communication modes. For example, having an online, asynchronous component to the standard studio critique could support less intimidating ways of participating as well as facilitating the opportunity for providing delayed feedback. This may offer students ways of communicating with their peers and interacting with their tutors that better suit their learning styles. Extending the studio class to include an online element can also be a way to support continued engagement for those times students are not able to physically attend classes.

Documenting creative work-in-progress
Documentation of work in progress provides visible evidence of thinking and making in studio-based learning. The visible format of developmental work is important as studio sessions are often centered around this material which is fundamental to the pedagogic process in art and design (Orr & Shreeve, 2018). This material is usually collected and recorded in sketchbooks, visual diaries, blogs, websites, loose-leaf sheets, folders etc. In the studio, students will often selectively present work for group discussion from the larger collection of developmental work undertaken. Working in the online space we quickly adapted to sharing this material over the screen. Students were asked to organise their material in advance; to digitise physical workbook pages, objects, raw material etc. so that others could easily see it (i.e. not hold a sketchbook up to a computer camera!). They kept blogs, video diaries,

made websites, created word and PDF documents, and used tools like Padlet™ and Wakelet™ to create, communicate and document practice.

What seemed to shift was the extent to which this developmental work was recorded and presented for feedback, with a more consistent effort, and a more comprehensive detailing of activity. This was perhaps a result of our online classes being so immediately focused on what students had done between classes - we moved sequentially around the group of students, who each shared their screens and presented new work as a regular part of our online studio sessions. Continuous access meant we could go back to things, could make comments at any time, add notes, annotate, and easily share material beyond our immediate class group and staff team.

The practice of regularly logging activity produced an archive where students appeared to include everything that they had been working on and thinking about rather than being selective or holding material back. This was particularly helpful to the process of providing feedback and following progress. With formal systems in place such as weekly uploading of documents to assigned folders on Google Drive there was an expectation set to regularly add material and that tutors would be looking for this. Recognising when students were not keeping up with coursework was made easier with archived, visual, class-by-class evidence of student engagement rather than only seeing selected work at assessment points.

A focus on process in art and design education means that lecturers want to see evidence of the learning journey (Orr & Shreeve, 2018). The integration of online modes in support of this pedagogical focus are potentially significant, owing to the unique affordances of digital media. Bendar and Vredevoogd (2006) comment on the advantages of digital media forms as part of implementing Blended Learning in the Design Studio noting: 'Technology provides several benefits to students. It can be used to present information in a variety of formats, accessible at all times, and leaving live class time for the intellectual communications that only people can provide' (2006, 119). Formalising an online presence as part of evidencing process may represent a transformation of this aspect of studio pedagogy, offering unequaled means to archive, access, present, track, assess, and provide feedback.

Collaborative research

Related to the previous observation, the dynamic nature of digital media was also valuable to collective research efforts. We set up course Padlet™ boards, for example, where project resources could be added to and commented on by students and staff at any time. The integration of multiple representations (multimedia) and the possibility to post, update, edit, link and share information accessible to everyone at any time added to the social potential and informational capacity for collective, collaborative research. Masdéu and Josep (2017) reflect on the collective management of information in bleneded learning studio projects as a positive addition commenting that 'unlike the conventional design studio where students treat information individually, in the Blended Design Studios, the information is accessible to everyone' (17). The synchronous-asynchronous affordances of digital systems offer powerful ways of gathering and sharing research material and increase opportunities for collaboration, providing new ways to learn together that further enable the social and community learning structures that underpin the studio model. Students also gain experience communicating and collaborating in diverse environments, skills necessary for the complex, hyper-connected future world of work and practice.

Studio as a state of mind

McWhinnie and Peterson (2017) talk about the multifarious nature of studio as an educational concept, pointing out that it is the 'creative milieu' [the embedded research, exploration, risk-taking, creative thinking critical reflection, observation of others practice, community environment] that the physical studio space facilitates (1655). The authors note a shift in the educational use of the term 'studio' related to the unsustainability of providing dedicated personal studio spaces for students in an ongoing way. With this in mind they suggest a reflection on 'studio' as metaphorical, a state of mind rather than an actual place, and consider the role of flexible spaces and blended learning relevant to the future of studio education. Conceptualising the studio as a state of mind means you can carry it with you; the studio becomes a condition of working rather than a physical site of practice. Studio learning in this framing can be considered a series of experiences dispersed across a series of spaces. I would suggest that this is a particularly useful conceptual position for navigating the potential of online learning for studio pedagogy. It opens up ways to conceive of studio teaching that emphasise the creative process itself and contemporary ways of working, for example, challenging us to question how current teaching reflects the professional practice world of digital workspaces, online networking and virtual studio practices.

Concluding remarks

In the opening pages of their book *Art and Design Pedagogy in Higher Education*, Susan Orr and Alison Shreeve (2018) challenge the idea that students choose to study in analogue or digital worlds, stating a rejection of 'the binary between the material and the digital university' (9). The spirit of this might also be carried across to a perspective of studio teaching where the digital and face-to-face settings are seen are seen as part of a continuum. This brings us to an idea of blended learning that integrates online learning as the newest component of courses that have always involved a mix of learning opportunities (on-campus studio, independent learning, field trips, off-site student exhibitions etc.). Online learning spaces likely represent the next natural extension to studio education as Lotz et al. (2015) explain: 'Social learning mechanisms represent one of the oldest and most natural pedagogies and online studios, one of the newest forms of human interaction, offer novel opportunities in which such learning can take place' (22).

Beetham & Sharpe (2020) describe the challenge for education in the digital age as knowing *how* pedagogy needs to change, stating that 'knowing that things have changed is not enough' (3). The consideration of digital technology demands a critical as well as creative response from educators in determining the shape of teaching practices in a changed context for learning. Slatter (2020) posits that 'the next focus in art school planning is to provide support through the blending of online and face-to-face modes' seeing this as 'increasingly more crucial at a time when tertiary art education strives to provide the discipline of art's rigour, while offering varied pace and delivery modes to capture the attention of a contemporary audience' (1). While the in-person experience will remain at the centre of practice-based studio education, affordances offered by online learning as part of a blended approach are poised to enrich studio education.

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