



The Virtual Studio: Academic Practice and Covid-19

PRACTICE-BASED PAPER

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ABSTRACT

This practice-based research was conducted during the pandemic to explore the possibilities of ‘studio virtualisation’ within an online learning environment. By harnessing the potential of social media, we explored methods to preserve established art and design studio practices, broaden participation and develop learning spaces that allow students to be expressive, active and engaged.

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The studio environment has been central to design practices and education for over a century. Typically, design studios are highly visual and interactive spaces—walls replete with post-it notes, sketches hung to share concepts, and physical models and prototypes scattering desks—the function of these objects is to spark new ideas and encourage creative discourse. The physical studio space is also important for supporting design critiques, showcasing work and sharing feedback early and often; the physical surroundings are integral to the collaborative activity, with a studio designed to support group-orientation and creative cooperation.

At DMU the essential role of the studio is established within the suite of Graphic Design programmes. Current undergraduate student work demonstrates skilful and enthusiastic handling of material; the approach to sketchbooks and tactile outcomes demonstrates reflection and experimentation. However, since the global emergence of COVID, physical design studio environments have been unable to function, and traditional working practices have been challenged and disrupted.

A creative response was required to continue to support the student cohort, and in March 2020 a proof of concept was established through trialling a ‘studio virtualisation’ with level 6 students. This enabled the Programme to develop a more formal framework to extend and integrate the model, with #virtualstudiodmu launched later that year. The #virtualstudiodmu project explored the potential of translating the physical studio culture, so vital for the design subject areas, into a virtual space. The potential for social media tools to provide a working platform was evident, offering the traditional aspects of physical creative space—inspiration, critique, cooperation and collaboration—through online engagement where students learn by exchanging ideas and networking.

The project was initially developed around the DMU Graphic Design community, enabling students and staff to be key participants and stakeholders, but as the project evolved the creation of a nurturing virtual platform, principally via Instagram, organically grew to engage with wider audiences. Industry experts reached out to share knowledge, learning experiences and advice to members of the virtual studio community.

For students, the #virtualstudiodmu became a source of motivation and an extra-curricular outlet and underpinned important lessons in presentation and processes. Overall, the opportunity to share and have their work celebrated enhanced the student experience. However, the project had an unintentional wider reach as it engaged with potential applicants, a useful marketing tool, and also potential employers who are eager to locate and engage with future creative talent. With 1300 unique users (at time of print), the #virtualstudiodmu community increases daily, as a result of new authentic content, highlighting the impact of the virtual studio.

The project addresses key societal challenges posed by COVID—how we can continue to work productively and effectively in online/virtual spaces and what can we learn that can enhance the ‘traditional’ approaches in a post-COVID environment? It also supports the sustainability of design through the development of an online studio model which will offer an alternative to the physical environments made impossible by COVID restrictions. As such, this research has the potential to have a great impact on the design sector, as well as the education sector who are also struggling to maintain communities of practice.

The Virtual Studio team are working hard to harness positive change, and have begun to consider new, emerging platforms whilst welcoming new creative partners to support staff, students and the wider creative community. Clearly, the virtualisation of traditional practice is a key debate, and to understand how it works and what it means can only benefit all sides. The #virtualstudiodmu can thus contribute to wider societal benefits and is accordingly relevant to future endeavours and contexts. Although this platform should not be seen as an alternative to design materiality, the project explores current needs and the emerging identity of postdigital cultures to address a contemporary issue adroitly and productively.

Read more about the #virtualstudiodmu here:

<https://www.jisc.ac.uk/news/building-a-better-future-01-dec-2020>

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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