

## Emergency Remote Studio Teaching: Notes From the Field

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*Abstract: The creative arts use primarily visual, kinesthetic, and somatic modes of teaching that depend on face-to-face communication in contrast to many other university subjects that rely more heavily on the written word. The hands-on, practice-based nature of art education makes it perhaps one of the least transferrable subjects to a fully online model. What can be learnt, then, from the forced situation of teaching and supervising studio-based learning in a higher education context under the 2019 coronavirus disease lockdown conditions? This reflective essay draws on the writer's experience as a fine arts lecturer involved in emergency remote teaching of studio-based visual arts courses during the first half of the 2020 academic year. Organized as a series of "fieldnotes," it aims to capture those fleeting, yet significant, thoughts and reflections so easily lost once things quickly reach a level of "new normal." Notes from the field include the effects of the shifted social dynamic of online communications in a teaching and learning context; the challenges of the video call as a dialogic space for the studio critique; the impact of the more structured nature of online systems with regard to documenting and recording creative work in progress; and the affordances of the dynamic, multimodal nature of the digital medium for working with contextual research material for creative practice. Developed as a pedagogical perspective combining reflection in action and reflection on action, this essay offers firsthand observations and discussion, in the context of relevant literature, as a contribution to urgent conversations on the shape of the future learning environment.*

*Keywords: emergency remote studio teaching, education during COVID-19, studio education, art and design education, online teaching and learning.*

On March 25, 2020, the university at which I teach moved into full online delivery of courses following a government announcement that Aotearoa, New Zealand was shifting to a "Level 4 lockdown" to combat the spread of the 2019 coronavirus disease (COVID-19). Like many educators, prior to this I had had no significant experience with online teaching. Familiarity with a digital learning management system (LMS), used largely to post course information, offer asynchronous discussion forums, and provide access to lecture recordings represented the extent of my "online" experience. We shifted from an on-campus, in-person teaching and learning environment to a fully online, remote learning situation under urgency and with little time for preparation.

The following notes are based on my own experience as a fine arts lecturer at the University of Auckland, Aotearoa, New Zealand. Our practice-based studio programs are, under normal circumstances, taught in small student groups, on campus, and with access to dedicated physical studio spaces and specialist workshops. My observations here are offered in the context of emergency remote teaching (ERT). ERT has emerged as a term to differentiate between courses designed in advance to be delivered online and those that would normally be delivered on campus but have been shifted online due to unforeseen circumstances so that students can continue their learning. ERT has been described as:

A temporary shift of instructional delivery to an alternate delivery mode due to crisis circumstances. It involves the use of fully remote teaching solutions for instruction or education that would otherwise be delivered face-to-face or as blended courses and

that will return to that format once the crisis or emergency has abated. (Hodges, Moore, Lockee, Trust, & Bond, 2020, para. 13)

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, universities worldwide shifted to using digital technologies to continue teaching in early 2020. What we experienced was remote learning, not online learning. It is important not to equate ERT with online learning with respect to evaluations of our teaching in 2020 (Hodges et al., 2020). Furthermore, Greene (2020) suggest a shift from an evaluative approach to assessing ERT to a documentary one, proposing a move toward narrative and reflection: “Curiosity rather than critique might be the most appropriate, and informative, response” (p. 4). Mindful of this, my approach here is searching and speculative rather than critical and evaluative.

The notion of a “fieldnote” provides a positive archetype for the content and organization of my searching, speculative thinking. Fieldnotes are qualitative notes recorded during or shortly after observation of the phenomenon under study. They can be descriptive and reflective (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Reflective fieldnotes capture the impressions and ongoing analytic processes of the researcher (Brodsky, 2008). In qualitative education research, fieldnotes are an aid to documenting observations, descriptions, and interpretations and can also “provoke critical processes for facilitating reflexivity and situating researcher positionality and subjectivity” (Burkholder & Thompson, 2020, p. 1). The vignettes that follow are offered in this spirit. They offer descriptions, observations, and reflections that may inspire further conversation and critical inquiry.

### **Reflection in Action and Reflection on Action**

This work engages an autoethnographic method in the sense of using a researcher’s personal experience to describe and reflect on practice and experience (Adams, Holman Jones, & Ellis, 2015). More specifically, it uses a first-person approach—a method that relies on the experiences of the researcher. The first stage of learning from and through a first-person method requires an unprejudiced openness to the details of experience (Roth, 2012). This level of openness provides insight into the taken-for-granted everyday activities and experiences that may go unreported (Patton, 2015) yet contain rich and meaningful potential—material that raises new questions and drives further research.

My fieldnotes combine reflection in action and reflection on action (Schön, 2016). Reflection in action suggests that we can think not only about doing, but also about doing something while doing it. Descriptive, narrative content notates reflection in action: looking to our experiences, connecting with our feelings, and building new understandings that inform our actions as a situation unfolds (Smith, 2001). This approach is in line with warnings about “evaluating” our teaching under the tumult of pandemic conditions. Greene (2020) suggested “a cautious and compassionate evaluation of what—if anything—we have learned about specific technological tools and flexible teaching practices” (p. 2).

Reflection on action (Schön, 2016) is done later, after the encounter, allowing us time to explore what we did and how/why things turned out the way they did. By doing this we develop sets of questions and ideas about our activities and practice (Smith, 2001). Interwoven throughout my fieldnotes is material from the surrounding literature that extends first interpretations, prompts questions, and points to sites for the further works of analysis and inquiry.

### **Fieldnote 1: A First Response**

As announcements of a pending nationwide lockdown were broadcast, our university quickly made plans for a teacher-only week that would involve planning for remote teaching, including a rapid

upskilling of technical know-how to enable staff to operate in a fully digital teaching environment. We managed 2.5 days working collectively on site before we found ourselves working from home, full time. Each of us swiftly prepared new learning planners, updated course outlines, prepared new project briefs, and adjusted project requirements so that teaching and learning could simply continue in some form, a form we had no idea would work at all for our studio-based subjects. We were 3 weeks into a 12-week semester when we shifted to online delivery.

I came away from my 1st week of emergency online teaching exhausted, but also thinking “this is not too bad, in fact, this seems to be working OK!” Many of my colleagues felt the same way. We may have just been relieved that we made something work at all. The students turned up, the tech didn’t break, and we could see and hear each other live in the Zoom-sphere, the online video conferencing space we used. We worked through our updated studio project plans with our 1st- and 2nd-year students, explaining our thinking and decisions for their adjusted first-semester course. Attendance was high, goodwill was high, and a new at-a-distance collective connectedness was taking shape. A heightened sense of community was apparent and our efforts were immediately acknowledged by students. Things seemed OK in our emergency online-studio bubble. We learned that we could be together, and get things done, at a distance.

Perhaps our initial feelings of success were a response to the fact that things didn’t appear to be completely falling apart? After all, we had no idea quite how this would go and very little experience, for the most part, with the tools and technologies we were now relying on. We relished the feeling that it was at least possible to do something, to get on with things albeit in a very different way. The short-term outlook also seemed to help. Maybe this would only be for 4 weeks, and then we would return to campus? That would be OK; we could do that. It wasn’t until we were told that we would be teaching and learning remotely for the remainder of the semester (9 weeks), and possibly into Semester 2, that our response started to shift a gear. We had been running on an initial burst of energy, an adrenaline rush, a fight or flight response. Everything had been happening at a very fast pace. It was crisis stuff. Once we moved a little beyond that first period, and with the knowledge that this was to continue for some time, things slowed down, and a deeper kind of rumination set in. I began to think more closely about what was happening in our online classroom.

## **Fieldnote 2: Shifted Social Dynamics**

The role of the teacher as a facilitator of learning was immediately heightened in the emergency online learning space. The change from in-person studio classes, where students and staff are present in each other’s company for long periods of time and where there is extended opportunity for dialogue, effected a shift in emphasis away from the teacher as the first point of call for help. Students needed to be more resourceful without the immediate and continuous contact offered in the face-to-face classroom.

Dialogue—between students and students and between students and teachers—is of central importance in studio education settings with the teacher holding a particular role in the group, that of subject expert (Ashton & Durling, 2000). This places teachers at the center of the learning experience (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Ashton and Durling (2000) noted that this apprentice–master model, with its high degree of contact between individual students and staff, is quickly becoming unsustainable in today’s educational environment. Education technology research has noted a distinct change associated with online learning where the teacher becomes a secondary figure in the learning process:

Face-to-face education is teacher centered. We are subject matter experts in the same physical space as students, they are our audience. This is not happening in online education. Here, the student is at the centre. We are promoting their active learning

and engagement. We are facilitating and enhancing their learning process by providing them all the necessary tools. (Vlachopoulos, 2020)

In online studio environments, social interaction and peer learning are things that are actively constructed and sought by students depending on the usefulness of this experience as perceived by students:

In the absence of immediate “expert” feedback in the studio, students make use of (and develop) their own expertise through their prior knowledge, the guidance and cues provided by the module material and prior engagement with tutors outside the studio. (Lotz, Jones, & Holden, 2015, p. 22).

It was easy to notice an increased self-reliance in the online classroom. The online environment seemed to shift the dynamic from students being reliant, to an extent, on staff for responses to their questions, to students finding alternative ways to find things out and testing their knowledge.

Using the breakout rooms feature in Zoom to facilitate student-to-student discussion proved helpful for collaborative learning and interaction, and for peer-to-peer feedback. Students regularly commented on how useful breakout sessions had been and routinely asked for more of these. They valued the possibilities for learning together in this way. There also seemed to be less distractions in a Zoom breakout room compared to the physical studio space. Time was precious and focus was high. Student survey information from our creative arts faculty revealed that 72% of students agreed they felt part of a community of learners during the time our course was online and 77% of students agreed that the online learning environment allowed effective communication between teaching staff and students.

Self-directed learning and peer learning are central learning concepts in studio education. One of the primary goals of studio education is to help students become self-operating learners. There may be good potential here for a review of current studio pedagogy to take advantage of online formats in further stimulating self-reliant and self-directed ways of working.

The studio critique is a signature pedagogical tool in the creative arts, characterizing the strong position of the dialogic approach in studio education compared with other disciplines. The critique is framed around the open participation of staff and students, who share different perspectives about the work that is being critiqued. While online video calls offered us the means to see and hear each other live, not being in the same physical space for our critique sessions was an immediate challenge. As expected, the loss of intimacy that in-person exchanges provide impacted the quality of our felt experience. The all-important gestures, body language, and physical interactions that communicate so much were missing. Research tells us that at least half of how we communicate with others is through nonverbal cues (Mehrabian, 2008). Without the richness of this information available to us we needed to work harder, which took its toll, and it was difficult to sustain the extended periods of critique time that we would normally manage in a face-to-face setting.

We quickly learned that shorter sessions with more breaks were necessary. What we had attempted to do was transfer, wholesale, the structure and time frame of a regular, in-class critique session to an online setting. In hindsight this was problematic. Digital learning expert Dimitrios Vlachopoulos pointed out the importance of not comparing, and not trying to imitate online and face-to-face teaching:

They are different. They are two, autonomous, high quality pedagogical models that can provide equally high quality education if they are implemented correctly. The

traditional strategies of face-to-face teaching probably won't work as well as we would like in an online environment. (Vlachopoulos, 2020)

Dimensions of sensory affect and social interaction are fundamental to practice-based studio learning. The social interchange of ideas in the physical space of the studio, whether as part of organized class events or just from being on site in the studio, is a critical part of the pedagogy. Sensory experiences of space affect the people working in them, how they feel about their learning (the social-emotional aspects of learning), and what meaning they are able to make of it (Marshalsey, 2015). Orr and Shreeve (2018) noted that:

A space may not seem like pedagogy, but in its widest sense the studio helps structure what can and does take place when students learn, and it has been a central part of organised learning in visual arts for more than a century. (p. 90)

Emulating the real-world artist's studio, the physical environment of the on-campus studio provides students and staff with social and intellectual cues for working and thinking like an artist. Daniels (2011) described the studio as "a canonical site of creativity, 'imagination's chamber'" (137). The studio space is a physical and conceptual laboratory for making, testing, exploring, risk taking, reflecting, evaluating, and critiquing. Entering the studio space, we are transported to a particular geographical venue for knowledge and imagination (Daniels, 2011). Relationships are set for particular types of knowledge to come into focus, including somatic, tacit, and embodied knowing. On-site, in-person studio critique dialogues make full use of these physical-social dimensions.

At the same time, there were some interesting outcomes of the altered social space of the online studio and the equalizing plane of the Zoom screen in our critique sessions. There seemed to be a different social dynamic in the more anonymous space of the online classroom, a less public space, perhaps a less exposing one. The option to turn one's computer camera off seemed to help reduce the anxiety of public speaking for some students. Students seemed to find this situation more amenable to contributing to critique discussion with many more, and otherwise usually quiet, students speaking up more often. This offered a distinct advantage over face-to-face formats where often the same voices are regularly heard and it can be difficult for some students to find ways to contribute. The online format seemed to offer a more balanced and even space for participation in this regard. Studies of the practice of critique as a form of feedback and assessment for learning in fully online art and design courses have revealed that online critique can lead to higher levels of participation and collaboration from students (see McIntyre, 2007).

Feedback from our student surveys also indicated that many students felt more comfortable asking questions during live, online classes, especially during small group sessions. They also found the chat facilities useful, offering a relatively low risk way to participate in class discussion. Social media conventions influence peer interaction and learning when studio pedagogies move from proximate to online worlds (Lotz et al., 2015). Students were able to bring their online communication skills into the online studio, which seemed to further energize critique dialogue.

E-learning research has regularly turned to the topic of the social context in studio education as one of the biggest challenges to online education (Ashton & Durling, 2000; Lotz et al., 2015; Marshalsey & Sclater, 2018; Wragg, 2020). Wragg (2020) observed that "the barriers to online design education relate to interaction and the social environment" (p. 2295) and concluded that while online studio education should not try to replicate the on-campus educational experience, it is possible to create an equivalent experience conducive to experiential learning and iterative development by recognizing and reprioritizing the social component of the studio. This is said to be achieved through creating inherently social activities that build a community of practice (Wragg, 2020). Interestingly, the

author reviewed the history of the studio education model still used by most departments of art and design, based as it has been for almost 100 years on the Bauhaus model, commenting that “the social aspect of the university that was once taken for granted is no longer guaranteed” (p. 2296). With increased and competing demands on students time it has become harder to spend long hours in the studio, a situation that used to be more common and contributed to the social aspect of the art school learning culture.

Similarly Lotz et al. (2015) pointed to the potential of developing online tools and technologies for social interaction and peer learning. From their detailed analysis of social engagement in online design pedagogies, the authors concluded that “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” (p. 22). These opportunities make use of the way the online environment facilitates sharing and discussion of work asynchronously with peers at a distance. The authors identified a number of themes that were found to have a positive effect on student outcomes, including time on task, listening in, quick social engagement, comment on conversation, a core stable network, and spectrum of engagement (see Lotz et al., 2015). These themes offer interesting potential for integrating online features into studio courses and programs.

### **Fieldnote 3: Documenting Creative Work in Progress**

Students are encouraged, and usually expected, to keep a record of their thinking and making as part of active documentation of their creative work in art and design courses. Workbooks, journals, notebooks, and visual diaries serve an important function in the life of the artist and their creative practice and are a key part of studio pedagogy. They are often required to be presented at assessment points, regularly accounting for a percentage of a student’s grade. A workbook (or other record) typically contains all kinds of notations as a record of influence and inspiration, reflection, and evaluation. These involve visual, textural, and other kinds of documentation of work in progress, as well as notes from critiques, responses to advice, collections of research material, and so on. A range of modalities is used—writing, drawing, photography, collage, detritus, and video, in analogue and digital formats. Students typically use a mix of physical notebooks and digital systems for this purpose.

The definition of a workbook is left purposefully broad in the art school setting, allowing students to create and curate these personal workspaces with few restrictions. This freedom allows the necessary room for students to develop their own working methods and ways of recording developments. They are remarkable in their diversity, deeply personal, and rich in content. Continued access to this material is important in a studio teaching context. Workbooks function as a central resource for conversations between students and staff, a practice at the center of studio-based pedagogy.

We worked with this component of studio learning differently in the emergency online classroom. I noticed shifts in the way that the workbook component was structured and made use of—they played an even more critical role than usual. Used as part of establishing a routine and as a means for checking in (which seemed more necessary than usual in the online teaching space), the presentation of workbook material by students was set as a regular requirement of our Zoom classroom. It was a way of encouraging continued engagement in projects, used for goal setting, and centered studio teaching around what the students did between classes in a more direct and focused way.

Ordinarily, workbooks are often kept relatively private and can sit in the background for long periods of time before students reveal their existence at assessment time. The more structured nature of online learning obliged students to more consciously present their material for discussion and review at each class. Seeing workbook content more regularly and presented in a considered way

helped with providing frequent and directed feedback on student work. The digital format was also an advantage in terms of collating everything in one place. Students maintained a variety of ways of working, including working hands-on with physical materials, but ultimately everything was collected together and documented in a single format that could be accessed at any time.

#### **Fieldnote 4: Contextual Research**

A subset of workbook or support material is the documentation of verbal, visual, and written resources students use to locate and understand the field or context they are working in. This is often referred to as “contextual research” or “artist model research.” Contextual research includes the gathering and analysis of material from a variety of sources (books, websites, artist talks, films, gallery visits, etc.), though increasingly, the internet is used for the majority of this kind of work. Learning outcomes related to contextual research include being able to identify, locate, and record contextual information (basic research skills) and to engage critically with information gathered (development of critical and analytical skills).

Students are generally well skilled in collecting and shifting digital material around using a range of tools and systems and working with digital media in a collaborative way in online spaces. Though students regularly use digital tools and technologies to source and explore contextual research material under usual studio learning circumstances, the shift to using only digital systems revealed the inherent strengths of this modality for these purposes. The technology easily supported nonlinear ways of organizing and reorganizing large amounts of information in ways that are not always possible in the analogue world. Digital tools made it possible to include or link to a wide range of different content types in a single space. Padlet, for example, offered a digital “wall” space to make notes, add URLs, and import a range of different file types—text documents, images, moving images, audio, and video. Google Drive was useful for storing multiple documents and sharing files to be worked on collectively. The dynamic nature of these media spaces afforded all kinds of updating, reorganizing, and editing. Sharing functions allowed staff continuous access to student work. Staff could log in at any time and add comments, suggest new resources, and direct students to specific content by directly adding files or hyperlinks. While this practice was already happening to an extent in our studio courses, the shift to online learning forced additional productive experimentation with processing contextual materials by both staff and students.

The ability to work with contextual research material in nonlinear, alternative ways facilitates modes of thinking and working that are important in creative learning. Often, the way one organizes material and has access to it allows for certain kinds of thinking to occur and connections to be made, and not others. “Visual contextual research,” for example, refers to collecting visual materials to be actively used in the generation of ideas and concepts for artworks. Playing with material in order to visualize different possibilities, discover unexpected connections, and engage in associative thinking is part of this process. Being able to easily duplicate material and re-order it, and to place different images beside/against each other in infinite combinations that accommodate chance, randomness, and intuition, supported the improvisatory modes of thinking and action used by artists (Danvers, 2003).

#### **Conclusion**

In 2020 the world changed, prompting a radical rethinking of the way we do things in education. Experiments that are going on right now are likely to have an immediate impact on our pedagogies postpandemic. The online studio reflects a complex and sometimes contradictory situation of benefits versus challenges. Working “alone together” in the online studio misses the fullest experience of all

that comes with in-person, community-reliant, hands-on studio learning. Much of the highly student centered approach of art and design education, based on guided learning through ongoing feedback in cycles of action and reflection, does not easily translate into a fully online learning experience (Fleischmann, 2015). The fundamental materiality of practices that are based on qualities of physical objects, surfaces, and spaces, and those that require specialist equipment (kilns, printing presses, darkrooms, high-end digital equipment, etc.) cannot be replicated in an online environment. The continuation of the on-campus experience in the context of practice-based studio teaching and learning is essential.

At the same time, some features of online learning may offer potential enhancements to the traditional studio. Limits to the on-site studio classroom are being exposed by alternative, digital forms of engagement. Artist and educator Constantina Zavitsanos explained how she has always allowed students to attend studio art classes using Zoom, pointing out the presence of several categories of existing inequity:

When a student has a reason not to use the physical classroom to display their work, [because they are disabled or sick, or because the work they create is best presented outside of traditional classroom critique] it reveals the physical and conceptual limits the classroom imposes. (Dancewicz, 2020)

The current emergency redesign and reinventing of our pedagogies is stimulating a deep reflection on the presumed defaults of studio education and there is value to be gained from what is achievable online, beyond a pandemic. E-learning is part of the new dynamic that characterizes educational systems at the start of the 21st century (Sangrà, Vlachopoulos, & Cabrera, 2012) and will impact all areas of education in time. Bender and Vredevoogd (2006) suggested studio courses could be enhanced with online technologies through blended learning models that involve face-to-face learning supplemented with asynchronous and/or synchronous communication via the internet. While not advocating technology as a substitute for the existing model, they suggested that “the use of digital media is a logical addition to the traditional design studio” (p. 114). Augmenting the on-campus studio learning experience with online components as part of a blended model is likely to be a critical proposal for studio education as we enter the latest educational paradigm.

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