The Past and Present of the Digital Manual (abstract)

Over the past hundred years drawing manuals have covered everything from sailing ships, wallpaper design, to cartoon dogs. These may not have been ‘pedagogical sketchbooks’, in the manner of Klee, but they do reveal much about their times. They set exercises, or examples for students to copy, and yet they also – confusingly – often advocate working only from nature.

Draw and paint software converts line and shape into the grammar of vector and bitmap, and automates perspective and animation. Like the drawing manual, the how-to diagrams use banal subjects. Intended for the amateur, they may show how to simulate the look of a drawing, rather than processes that improve drawing techniques.

We may speculate that the ‘digital sketchbook’ is now the iPhone. But the integration of digital drawing with drawing on paper can be complex, and lead off in other directions. The need for sketchbooks will not disappear, even if the format changes. Already the student workbook, self-conscious with its pasted-in sources and bored drawings, looks like pointless labour. A set of agile studies, showing how a drawing can develop and be digitally elaborated could be one answer. I propose a sideways look at those early drawing manuals - their pitfalls, eccentricities, prejudices, and insights – for clues to formulating the ‘pedagogical digital sketchbook’.