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| Title | How is digital culture influencing your practice? |
| Type | Article |
| URL | http://ualresearchonline.arts.ac.uk/11152/ |
| Date | 2017 |
| Citation | Lange, Silke and Robertson, Claire (2017) How is digital culture influencing your practice? Spark: UAL Creative Teaching and Learning Journal, 02 (2). pp. 139-143. ISSN 2397-6594 |
| Creators | Lange, Silke and Robertson, Claire |

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‘Looking: Thinking: Making’: How is digital culture influencing practice?

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Abstract

Looking: Thinking: Making considers the initial findings and observations gathered during the first phase of a project at Central Saint Martins (CSM), University of the Arts (UAL), investigating the creative processes with which students engage. This collaborative educational research – initially piloted on the MA Fashion Communication with Promotion – focuses on the values, roles and uses of digital capabilities, literacies and spaces, that students experience throughout a one year course. This on-going study provides a framework through which to explore the anxieties of being a creative practitioner in an evolving digital culture with wide ranging modes of communication.

Keywords

Fashion Communication; digital presence; digital literacies; peer learning

Looking: Thinking: Making

A creative practitioner working within Fashion Communication today is required to be digitally literate in a number of media and technologies. For instance, photographers who traditionally work with still images are frequently asked to ‘do a bit of film’ as part of the shoot and most cameras are now equipped to do this. They are not only required to know how to use such camera functions, but also to work creatively with a multiplicity of media. Kerry Facer explores this in her book *Learning Futures*, observing that students today have to be able ‘to model, to experiment, to visualize, to verbalize, to write and to film’ (Facer, 2011, p.71). There is an expectation that students need to be taught to use a wide range of digital tools that allow them to deal with the multiplicity of roles they will be required to adopt and adapt to after graduation. Within art and design, the challenge is how universities can facilitate this learning, across a cohort of students who come from a variety of backgrounds with a diverse set of skills and varying learning needs.

Following initial conversations regarding such challenges, drawing on our respective experiences as an educational researcher in art and design pedagogies, and a pathway leader in fashion communication; *Looking: Thinking: Making* was created. The title of the project reflects our joined perception of what it means to be, and / or become, a critically informed practitioner. The MA Fashion Communication with Promotion course at CSM provides a suitable group of students for us to carry out the pilot study with – it consists of a small number of students, is a relatively new course, and works with a diverse group of technicians covering a range of media and technology.

Throughout the first few months – or the first phase – of our research between spring and autumn in 2016, we have gathered a number of key observations, described in this paper. We have conducted two ‘observation sessions’, some informal conversations and two semi-structured discussion groups,

one with students and one with technicians. Our observations involved studying the social interactions between students, tutors and technicians, with a focus on the range of teaching methods used on the course. Alternatively, the semi-structured discussion groups allowed us to identify participants' perceptions and experiences of working within the digital culture of the course.

As part of this project, a blog was set up to facilitate online discussions amongst students, who were encouraged to reflect on how digital culture influences their practice. This platform was chosen because 'blogging has the capacity to engage people in collaboration activity, knowledge sharing, reflection and debate' (Hiler, 2002; cited in Williams and Jacobs, 2004, p.1). The blog intended to gather different forms of data, including oral and visual contributions. Although we were aware of effective approaches to encourage students to take part, for example by awarding marks to encourage blog contributions (Williams and Jacobs, 2004), we considered this practice unethical for our project (BERA, 2011), as it drew no direct relationship to coursework. On reflection, this may not have been the most suitable platform for the purposes of our project, as neither technicians nor students engaged with the blog.

Contrary to the investigations undertaken by a significant pre-existing body of research, which indicates that training supports and evolves online communities of practice (Bruns, 2006; Wenger, 2010; Williams and Jacobs, 2004), our research found that students preferred face-to-face conversations to public online discussions. As the course was still fairly new at this time, we encouraged students to reflect critically on their digital learning experiences using the blog, but the public nature of this context may explain their reluctance to express views or concerns via this medium.

Anxieties of working in the digital space

Further to this hesitancy to speak out in a public virtual space, during informal interactions with students it emerged that they encountered difficulties accessing the platform on which the blog is hosted. Students' anxieties about engaging in the online space, also evident in technicians, diverges from the belief that current cohorts have 'grown up digital and therefore are reliant in using digital technologies' (Prensky, 2012; cited in Selwyn, 2016, p.1). It is also noteworthy that though students did not distinguish between the physical and the digital, their responses indicated the opposite to be true. We observed this trend during a critical review of student work, whilst discussing the use of Instagram. Here, students commented on their ambivalence towards the platform, and said they were anxious about the constant pressure to be perceived as cool.

Does this mean that students' anxiety is mainly connected to using social media platforms? To answer this, we made a distinction between using social media platforms (working digitally) and applying digital tools such as Photoshop to realise creative ideas and projects. Rather than learning how to use a digital tool, students were more anxious about working digitally, stating, 'we learn a tool when we need it'. They accepted responsibility for learning a digital tool themselves, perceiving CSM as an art school where 'you don't get technical training but learn how to develop your creative practice'. The pressure of working digitally, as in using social media, suggests that students feel that they constantly have to promote themselves and their work. Ultimately, this has an impact on their abilities to take creative risks, as they do not want to show all experiments and failures publicly online. As expressed by this student:

For Instagram I do it because I have to. I hate it. I hate putting in stuff. I like looking at other people's work but it really annoys me to post things.

(student 1 feedback, Lange and Robertson, 2016)

The benefits of peer-to-peer learning

We observed face-to-face critical reviews in the studio, where students engaged with each other's practices and revealed that they were keen to understand the work of others and their motivations for creating it. During the discussion group with technicians, one highlighted and questioned why peer-to-peer learning seems to occur more naturally in a physical space, such as in the darkroom or studio, than in the digital space – a question we are keen to address in future discussions.

Feedback suggests that both technicians and students value working collaboratively and collectively as a means of understanding different practices:

The best way I have learned stuff is through trying some program and then asking a friend or asking a colleague or asking a peer. And unless you set up a situation where that's going to happen it's probably not.

(student 2, during discussion group, Lange and Robertson, 2016)

It's all about peer-to-peer, it's all about learning from one another [...] an attempt to validate a different way of learning where your technicians are also learning new technology, so everybody is learning something new.

(technician 1, during discussion group, Lange and Robertson, 2016)

As indicated by technicians, above all they value opportunities to be more involved in curriculum design and delivery, as it helps them to 'join up the dots' between workflow and learning processes. An example of this has been technicians' contributions to critical reviews on MA Fashion Communication with Promotion.

The notion of supporting collaborative learning is also explored by Saranne Weller in her book *Academic Practice* (2015):

Peer assisted learning, also described as peer coaching or peer mentoring, is another strategy that can be used to support students to learn together to share learning experiences [...] building a sense of belonging to the wider learning community.

(Weller, 2015, p.202)

Our project indicates that this need to belong to a community is even more important, in light of the anxieties associated with the ever-increasing use of digital technologies and learning within digital spheres.

Re-defining digital literacy

Following on from these observations, it became clear that rather than narrowly defining digital literacies as a set of technical capabilities or attributes, we needed to consider how to define digital literacy to encompass this sense of belonging, which is valued by both students and teachers. Colleagues from across CSM worked together to redefine what digital literacy means to communities of students and staff, identifying and defining a set of key terms. In particular, 'inclusivity' emerged as a defining principle, as it describes the ways in which a person uses a variety of strategies to communicate and collaborate with a range of individuals and communities. Other significant terms and definitions identified as part of this process were:

- **Agility** – to cultivate a flexible and adaptable relationship regarding networks, processes, tools and their evolving importance for creative individuals, environments and industries.
- **Criticality** – to actively and continuously reflect upon and question the digital environment.

- **Confidence** – to feel empowered to work and grow in new ways, despite inhibitions or challenges.
- **Responsibility** – to participate online whilst applying care in presenting and managing digital personas in a variety of contexts.
- **Creativity** – to engage (with) the digital and by extension, culture and economy, as artists and designers who strive to transcend passive consumption.

These attributes are an important outcome of the first phase of this on-going project. Phase two of this research, which commenced in 2017, explores the meaning of these terms further, particularly in relation to the digital practices applied by staff and students on the MA Fashion Communication with Promotion.

Future frameworks

Sue Beckingham and Chrissi Nerantzi (2014) suggest that student learning with technology can be designed using the 5C model – by connecting, communicating, curating, collaborating and creating. This model echoes another possibility or framework, which arose from our discussion groups. Rather than imposing digital tools or software training for the sake of it, our research thus far reveals that it is instead more valuable to facilitate discursive learning spaces in which students and staff can articulate the demands required by digital learning, those issues that emerge from creative practice. Such approach allows everybody to define their own workflow, by working together with practitioners, technicians and students in projects realised through peer-to-peer learning.

Within this framework, students and staff are partners who jointly initiate processes and work through them collectively to develop their ability to reflect during the course of action as well as on the outcome. Our terms and definitions will lead into and inform phase two of the *Looking: Thinking: Making* research project, during which we will explore these questions, asking how we might reduce the level of anxiety experienced by students and staff when working digitally and consequently, whether online platforms are indeed the most appropriate methods of facilitating a discursive learning culture on the MA Fashion Communication with Promotion course, and possibly beyond.

By sharing our understanding of how digital culture impacts the learning journey of students, this project aims to generate ideas and approaches that support students in developing their confidence as critically informed practitioners in uncertain, changing territories. The timeliness of our research was confirmed during the discussion following our presentation at *DeL 2016*. Members of the audience commented particularly on the urgency of developing strategies for creating a sense of belonging for individual practitioners (students and staff alike), in both physical and virtual spaces.

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Biographies

Dr Silke Lange is Associate Dean of Learning, Teaching and Enhancement at Central St Martins. Silke's research encompasses the creative process, collaborative learning, interdisciplinarity, learning environments and the student as co-creator. She has been involved in projects such as the 'Innovators Grant 2015' at the Node Centre in Berlin and *Broad Vision*, an interdisciplinary art / science research and learning programme. Her investigations into learning environments have been published in various journals and in an international anthology on Learning Space Design as a co-authored chapter entitled: *Promoting Collaborative and Interdisciplinary Learning via Migration between different Learning Spaces*.

Claire Robertson is Pathway Leader on the BA (Hons) Fashion Communication with Promotion course at Central St Martins. Claire has photographed the work of leading and visionary fashion designers and her backstage photography has been published in a variety of media including *Alexander McQueen: The Life and the Legacy (2014)*. Her educational research is concerned with the creative process, and collaborative and inter-disciplinary learning. She currently co-leads on the educational research project *Looking: Thinking: Making*, focusing on digital learning within fashion communication. Initial findings of this research were co-presented as a paper at the *Designs on eLearning Conference*, New York, 2016.