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Reflection: Making little things visible

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The response to the coronavirus pandemic of 2020 (Covid-19) will leave a lasting impression on all sectors of education. For design educators especially, the rapid transition from traditional to distance modes of teaching was, and still is, particularly challenging. Design, and especially studio-based education, remain predominantly physically focused and located practices. Moving out of the studio takes away far more than just a space for teaching; so much so, that the initial response to the response to the shift has been compared to that of grief (Brown, 2020).

But what has 2020 revealed about our discipline? About the state of our teaching and learning? About the resilience and legacy of our modes of education? Has the studio, as a fixed space, proven to be impossible to replace? Or will some of the affordances and opportunities experienced become part of future curricula? What does the response say of design education research and knowledge?

Our experiences during 2020 allow a unique opportunity to explore these questions simply because we have all had to confront them in some way. The reflexive nature of our subject has had to be applied to our learning and teaching practices and some of this reflection and learning will be captured in a forthcoming Special Issue in DTEIJ through a special issue and call for papers (see the Journal website for details). The call particularly welcomes insightful reflection on the transitions of the last year and what this might tell us about design education practice and research. In the meantime, this article presents a few observations from the past year.

Things made visible

One thing the crisis did was make certain things visible: things we rarely pay attention to or have taken for granted because they are simply there. Among these are the many events, interactions, connections, and so on, that educators rely on in traditional settings to support teaching and learning: noticing a student's expression of confusion; the serendipity of a student seeing another's work and thinking…; the 'buzz' or 'rhythm' of a shared space as a deadline approaches; the simple act of a shared sketch; etc.

These 'little things', it turns out, are really quite important when it comes to studio as a *mode* of learning, many of which we are either completely unaware of or have so tacitly embodied that we rarely 'see' them at all. The studio provides the affordances and conditions for this range of 'little things' to take place, as has been observed in many studies, whether this is uncertainty and ambiguity (Orr & Shreeve, 2018); sensory affect (Marshalsey, 2017); serendipity (Makri et al., 2014); or even extending our cognition (Radzikowska et al., 2019). Such studies often focus on particular details and provide interesting and unique glimpses of such 'little things'. As design educators, we read about them, nod in agreement, and continue to rely on them taking place daily in our own studios. But we rarely ask how we would recreate

these little things deliberately, or ask what would we do if we no longer had a physical studio to rely on to allow them to emerge?

Historically, design educators have not really had to interrogate such details too closely. As Doblin, quoted in Dilnot (2017), observes, "design was what you did without knowing what you did", which can be immediately extended to design education: if designers continue to come out of the design education process then it's working. The nature of tacit knowledge is such that it offers the option to simply be left unexamined on the condition that it continues to be 'transferred' and produce the desired results. So, when tacit facilities or affordances are suddenly removed, it's perhaps unsurprising the disruption is far greater than imagined.
If you think that these 'little things' are the preserve of traditional design courses moving online, you'd be wrong: at The Open University, UK (OU), we've been teaching design at a distance for nearly 50 years (Holden, 2009; Cross & Holden, 2020) and, when we get asked 'How do you teach design at a distance?', we also struggle to articulate this directly. Even though our studios are distributed and online, they still rely of a whole range of implicit properties and affordances that we, too, often take for granted. Just as the traditional studio is a complex practicum comprised of 'little things', so, too, are successful distance design courses. Writing down such tacit knowledge is exceptionally difficult and, like learning to design, it is perhaps in the application and experience of teaching practice where the knowledge is really 'stored' (Jones, 2020). Online and distance design education, as many colleagues have found out over the past year, is at least as complex as its traditional counterpart. So, perhaps it's time to take these 'little things' a bit more seriously, not only in terms of teaching and learning, but also in terms of scholarship and research, where the last year has allowed a way to consider what really matters in design education.

Understanding 'little things'

Of course, this is where we do have to be careful: comparing traditional, online and distance learning modes is a non-trivial matter. As many colleagues have found out, it is simply not the case that an instructional activity in one mode can be transferred directly to another. For example, having proximate, synchronous time in a physical space does not fully translate to proximate, synchronous online spaces. Whilst some of the properties of these activities might translate well (immediacy of communication, idea representation, etc.), the valuable properties that matter so much to student learning can be far harder to transfer (serendipity, embodied cognition and conceptualisations, social learning and comparison, etc.).

Hence, when moving between traditional and distance settings, it is very often the normally invisible properties and affordances, the 'little things', that are the critical and valued components of the learning experience. When these are not recognised and translated appropriately, their omission becomes obvious in terms of outcome, although the cause can remain hard to see. This makes it difficult to directly compare alternative settings and modes of learning without being very careful about what it is we are exploring, as well as acknowledging the conditions and limitations of our inquiry. Very few studies undertake such work appropriately and either fall short of genuine comparison (Broadfoot & Bennett, 2003) or, understandably, do so from an *a priori* favouring of one mode over the other (Han, 2019). More recent work is beginning to address these issues by providing more rigorous comparisons and methods (e.g. Saghafi et al., 2012; Fleischmann, 2019; Jones et al., 2020), but these all face the same challenging basis of comparison. We have no complete definition of studio (Boling et

al., 2016) and some would argue we cannot ever have such a definition (Brandt et al., 2013; Cennamo, 2016), whilst non-designer educators look on in frustration at this 'uncertainty' (Lyon, 2011; McGimpsey, 2011). I would suggest that this is at least in part due to the 'little things' we all take for granted in our tacit practices. The studio, whether physically proximate or online, is the space where we host these little and invisible things and this is strongly linked to the constructivist and student-centred character of studio: it is a place that allows the 'right sorts of opportunities' (Schön, 1987), the 'little things', to emerge in support of learning. What has emerged in this last year, then, is the start of a recognition that it is these underlying affordances, the 'little things', in studio that really matter. Translating and working with these continues to be the real challenge across different modes of learning, a challenge faced by any design educator or researcher. By looking across and between modes of design education, whether distance, blended, augmented, or traditional, we have been given ways of seeing these 'little things' that contribute to, or even make up, the studio. Perhaps in doing so we can start to say some interesting little things about them.

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