

Making the Virtual Real: The VLE as a Context for Production in Fine Art Learning and Teaching Studio Practice

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Abstract

This paper explores ongoing interests in the relationship between fine art and technology alongside linkages with learning and teaching, specifically the place of the virtual in relation to studio practice, and a search for what Penny (2004) has coined, as the ‘missing pieces’ between art and technology. While Virtual Learning Environments are increasingly important educational spaces, it is still necessary to define how the virtual supports the needs of individuals as *makers*, with virtual space offering both a site and process for the production of work. This paper considers the potential of the virtual within the context of learning and teaching, as a unique, dynamic site for production within fine art practice and studio teaching, through which individuals *make, exchange* and *reflect* as practitioners. It also reflects on how we might extend the role of the virtual in terms of the *real*, by means of its relationship to the studio.

In search of the ‘missing pieces’

“A diverse range of new digital cultural practices are currently emerging. This cultural change demands new types of educational programs” that “will combine existing disciplines in new ways and [...] include new emerging contexts, new techniques and new practices” (Penny, 2004).

Writing about the rapid changes being experienced in digital technologies, Penny (2004) suggests that education has to adapt and grow to absorb and develop this potential within existing processes and practices. Penny argues strongly that unless a wider body of disciplines and practitioners within institutions engage with this potential, new technologies - including the virtual - will endure a “*two cultures syndrome*”, and an “ad-hoc” existence in the life of institutions (Ibid.)

In the case of art and design education, or more specifically fine art studio practice, tensions between the *virtual* and the *real* seem to form part of the dilemma/s facing many arts practitioners/educators in considering how to extend new technologies, such as the virtual, in relation to studio practice. This paper aims to engage with some of these tensions by examining ways in which the virtual might relate to the studio and indeed enhance practice within this space. It introduces three publicly accessible, in-progress, learning and teaching projects initiated within the School of Fine Art at The Glasgow School of Art, by which students *make, exchange* and *reflect* as practitioners on their development. As the importance of context permeates the work of contemporary practitioners, the aims of this paper are to consider a range of ways of supporting students to engage with the virtual as an opportunity for individualising learning spaces, both in terms of appearance and content; and how the space of the virtual becomes a context for production that offers students different approaches to making and dissemination.

The projects discussed here cover both undergraduate (UG) and postgraduate programmes (PG) – UG stem from Sculpture and environmental art (SEA) and PG from a New media Masters course. These include;

- The Dynamic Project Brief (UG)
- First Year Fine Art (SEA) Studio blog (UG)
- The Post Graduate New Media weblog (PG)

As well as reflections on the limitations of the virtual - and the studio – discussion of these projects aims to open up what the potential of studio/VLE innovations might be in terms of possible future learning and teaching

programmes that might extend the role of the virtual through its relationship *to* the studio. It will also allow consideration of opportunities for the development of assessment.

Before entering into the *missing pieces*, a brief word on the nature of this essay. As someone whose main preoccupation is the studio, as an active space of pedagogy and practice, the approach here is to present as much visual insight to the projects discussed as possible. Coumans (2003) has described this approach as a kind of “visual essay”, more attuned to the nature of art and design practice.

The Virtual and the Real

“Art and design education promotes learning and teaching as an active exchange of intellectual and technical expertise and strives to provide an academic environment in which this can be achieved” (School of fine art, 2006).

At The Glasgow School of Art, and across most art and design education, it is often noted that learning in the studio is *learning made visible*. As *Project zero* researchers, such as Seidel and Gardner might suggest, this happens through forms of *documentation* or presentation of thinking (See *Project zero*). However, this paper aims to present *visible learning* as ways that students *make, critique* and *reflect* both privately but importantly publicly, as the processes and products of learning are manifest and shared in the *real* space of the studio. Learning in the studio aims to provide opportunity for students to experience professional practice, particularly in relation to working alongside others, experiencing a critical and supportive environment as part of a strong sense of community. As studio based education is invited to enter into and use VLEs as part of this learning experience, there is a need to look at the methods that are used in the studio, in order to identify what is key and how these processes relate *to*, have meaning *within* and *extend* the potential of the virtual.

Learning in the studio: cause and effect

The *cause and effect* project is delivered in term 1 of First year fine art, when students have just arrived in the subject area. It takes place in a large open studio space, some 2,000 square feet in dimension, involving over 30 students in a communal making activity that requires both individual responsibility, alongside shared negotiations and discussion. The aims of this project are to allow students to understand that as a learner they are not isolated and as a student of art they do not have to be reliant on solely their own imagination and ability to resolve problems. This allows the student to set the parameters of the difficulty of the problem to be solved, however, work together to resolve this *with* others.

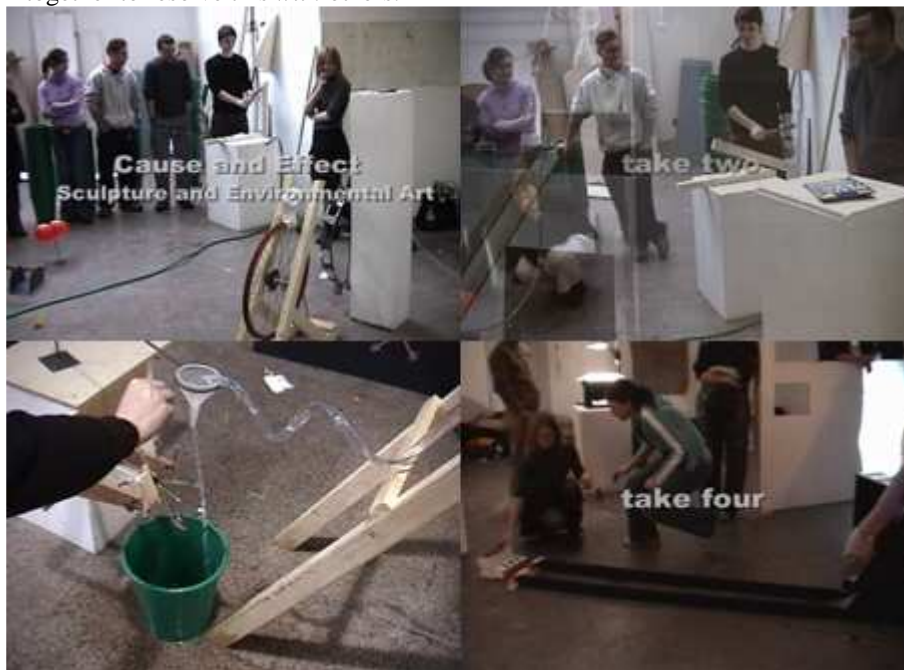


Fig.1 Images from ‘Cause and Effect’ studio project

Working in small groups of 3-4, students are set the task of resourcing the project, initially through found materials and objects, that are used to devise and create a chain of reactions, where each event is triggered by the previous and in turn generates the next. The project is discussed in the context of practitioners such as Fischli and Weiss (1987), where collaboration is extended to a group/s, in charge of the development of a discrete event. However, as part of a chain, it requires that each group negotiates with those 'before' and 'after' in order to resolve how their part in the action relates to one another, with the aim of the whole work coming to together as a live and public performance, which each sequence chains together. As well as the need for individuals within each small group to help one another problem-solve, groups have to then negotiate more widely, listening, responding and adapting to the needs of others. While this allows students to foreground individual skills, it also enables them to share experience and support one another. As the process culminates in a live public event, *success* relies not only on the ingenuity of the problem-solving approaches but on communication – as the different 'takes' in Fig. 1 signal, a lot can and does go wrong and the project is centered on this as part of the learning experience.

At the same time as this kind of work is developing *in* the studio, we are also amidst developments of the role of VLEs as part of the learning experience. In the case of The Glasgow School of Art, Blackboard, has recently been acquired. It is interesting to view the stark, administrative appearance of Blackboard's file cabinet-like presentation (See Fig. 2.).

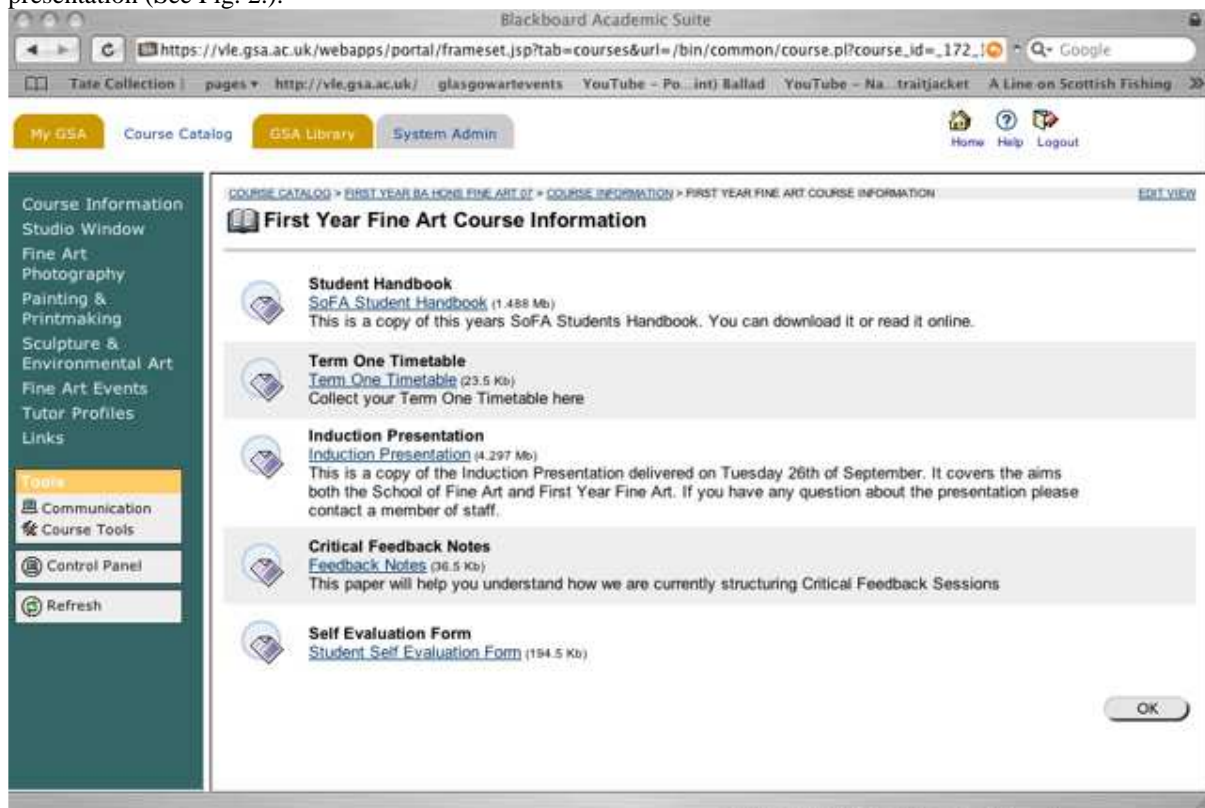


Fig. 2 Blackboard screen grab.

This is in sharp contrast to Fig. 1, which relays the visual and performative dynamic of many studio projects. As a practitioner, concerned with how the virtual relates to the studio, these contrasts raise key questions as to what benefits a virtual learning environment might have for students? How might the virtual support and enhance studio based experiences? How can the virtual pull students *in* and can it create as powerful learning opportunities as the studio?

While considerable research has been undertaken into the role of technology in breaking down learners' isolation, particularly socially and demographically (see Open university), and while much cotemporary practice is relational and communal (Papastergiadis, 2006; Bourriaud, 2002), interest here was to engage with the potential of the relation of this communal practice (of the studio) *to* and *alongside* the virtual. The following projects, lay out some practice-based responses that try to address this potential.

The Dynamic Project Brief

Presented by this challenge and through the development of research undertaken into other approaches to the place of the virtual in studio based practice and education (Cosgrove, 2001), the question became how to avoid allowing the VLE to become only a *parking lot* for word documents and PDFs, but a dynamic site and context for the *making, sharing and production* of work. One of the crucial learning and teaching tools in the studio that helps students (and staff) to make sense of what we do, is the *Project brief*. This is what sets out the programme of study for the student. However, despite the time and work that would go into preparing the project brief, experience showed us that the student would most often read it, fold it and then put in their pocket or sketch book, therefore only engaging with the learning outcomes and expectations for a very short period of time. In order to stimulate a longer engagement with the starting point and aims of the project, opportunities offered by the dynamic potential of the VLE offered a way of doing this. Working with Web2 tools - which are free and publicly accessible - we began to explore how to open up the potential for students to gain wider knowledge of the subject through the use of blogs and Wikis, to develop a project brief that would exist on the VLE, not only as a straightforward download but as a dynamic site in itself.



Fig. 3 The dynamic project brief

A template was created using a simple blogging application (*text pattern*), which allowed First year staff to create web-based project briefs with all of the functionality of a small website (See Fig. 3). This was then placed inside the institution's own VLE template, allowing staff to create avenues into deeper areas of resource for students without being overly prescriptive. Each *Dynamic project brief* may contain as many as 30 hypertext or image links, providing a rich research resource for students to traverse the diversity of information available via the internet. As well as opening up a more dynamic space, it also allowed us to bring a common structure to the way that we delivered the *Project briefs*, creating fields for learning outcomes, titles, notes, dates and times. In this way, the common layout or architecture enabled us to establish an admin area in which staff could archive, store and share the history of the programme through a much richer resource.

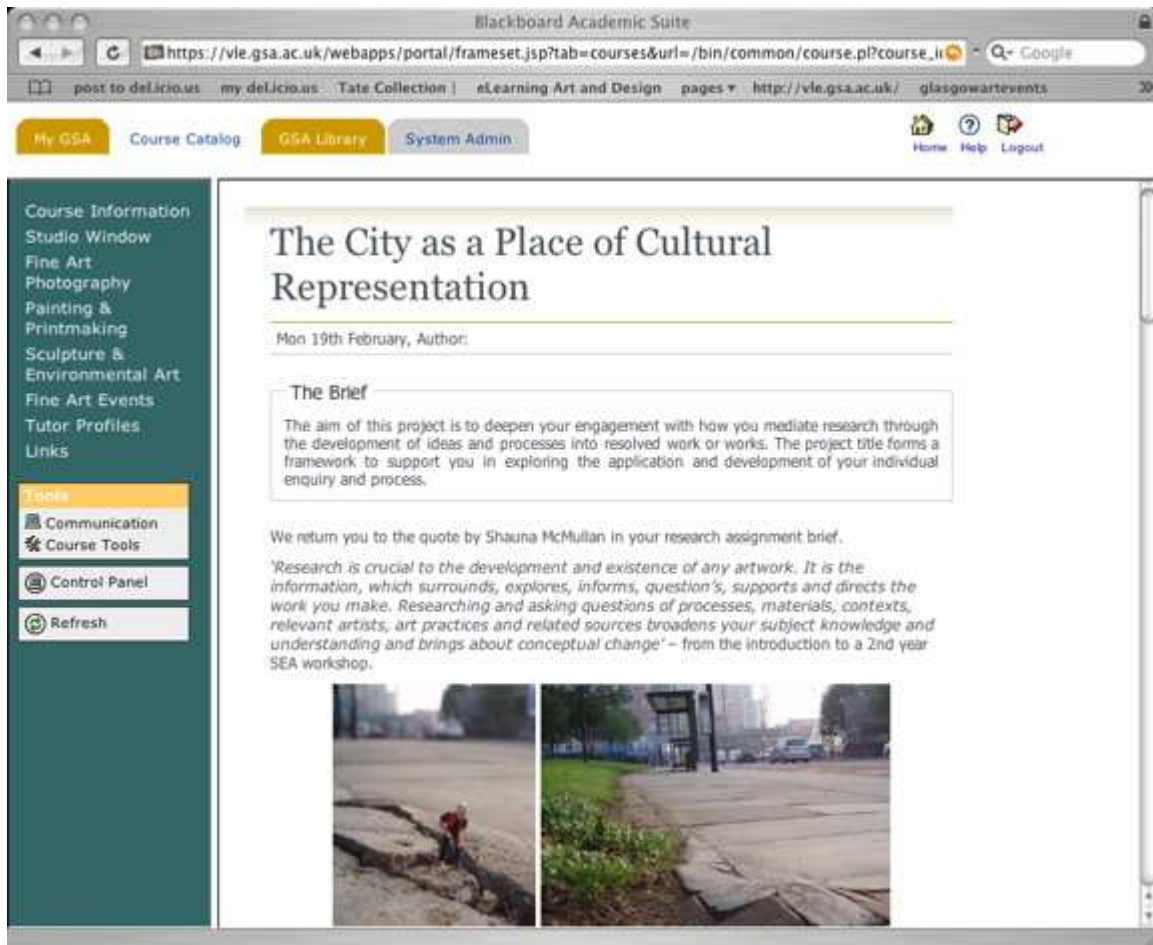


Fig. 4 The Dynamic project brief admin area

As the template generates the URL to paste into Blackboard, it allowed us to seamlessly embed the *Dynamic project brief* within the confines of the more prescriptive, corporate appearance and functionality of the VLE. As well as recognising how such a resource might enrich the student experience, this initial step into the studio/virtual relation, also allowed the production of tools and support for staff to work through html - many of whom had little experience of this area or language. Although not designed or put forward as Professional development, the simplicity of the tools, and their place as *part of* an existing need to develop a *Project brief*, helped bring staff into and equip them to work within the realm of the virtual in new ways (For further discussion on the need for other forms of relevant, subject specific professional development in this area see *Futurelab*).

The Dynamic project brief shows one way of more creatively and imaginatively providing students with guidance through a project, which at the same time creates a richness that holds attention for longer as they *use* the project brief as a *hub* for exploring the internet and developing further research. As educators, there is added benefit, in that we can now see many of the references from within the brief appearing in students' sketchbooks and research folders.

However, the issue that arose from this project was how do students upload to secure VLEs such as Blackboard and how – as educators - do you encourage students to want to do so? In First year fine art, a space for the visibility of the students' voice that would help *make visible* their critical engagement within that space became the next aim in establishing an even more dynamic site, reflective of how students were interacting with the programme of learning.

The SEA studio blog

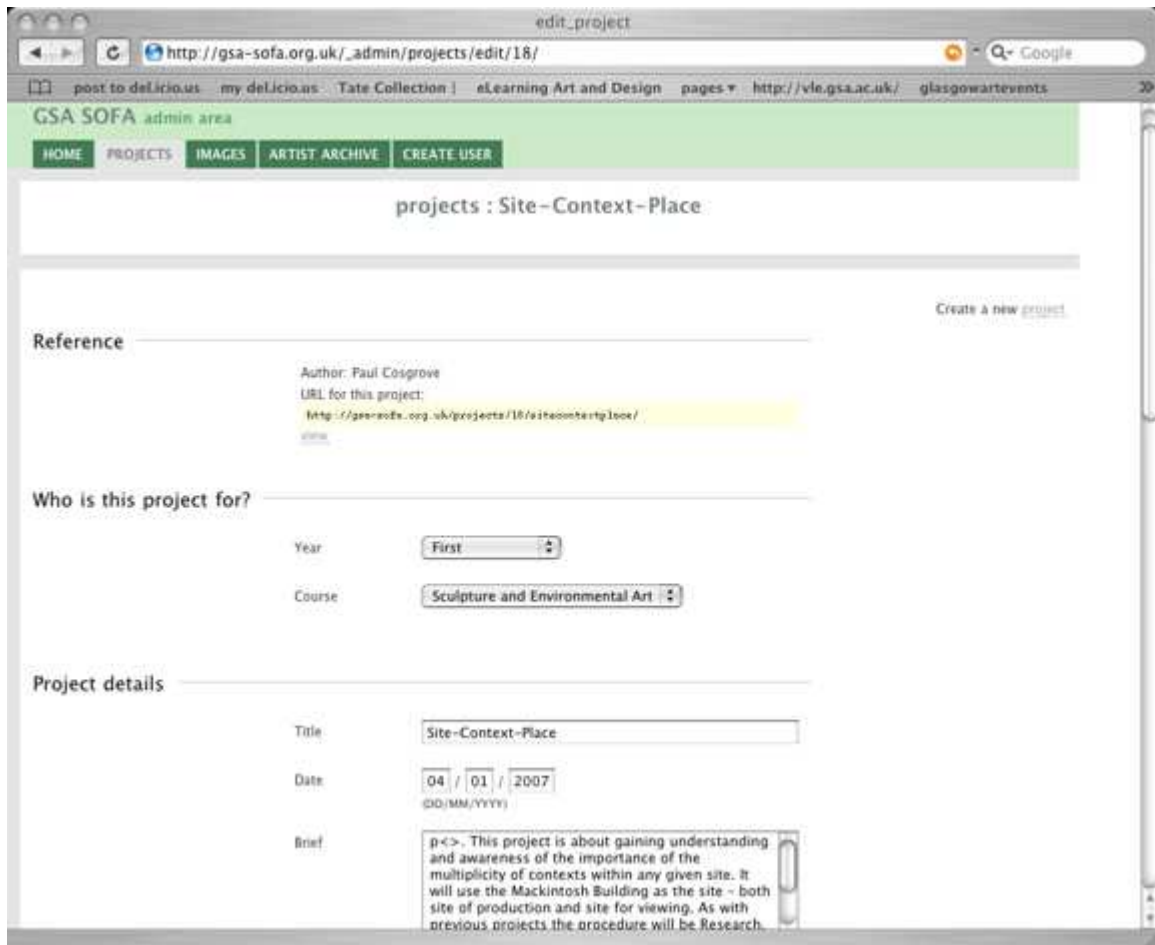


Fig. 5 The Sculpture and environmental art studio research blog

Concern to develop students' interaction with the *Dynamic project brief*, led to the development of a subject area blog. Again, devised using simple Web2 tools - in this case blogger - like the *Dynamic project brief*, the weblog acted as a hub for all of the students on the programme. The SEA studio blog allowed students to use the weblog as a focus for sharing and gaining insight to how others were responding to and tackling the project brief, as well as disseminating the interests and research that they were developing through the project.

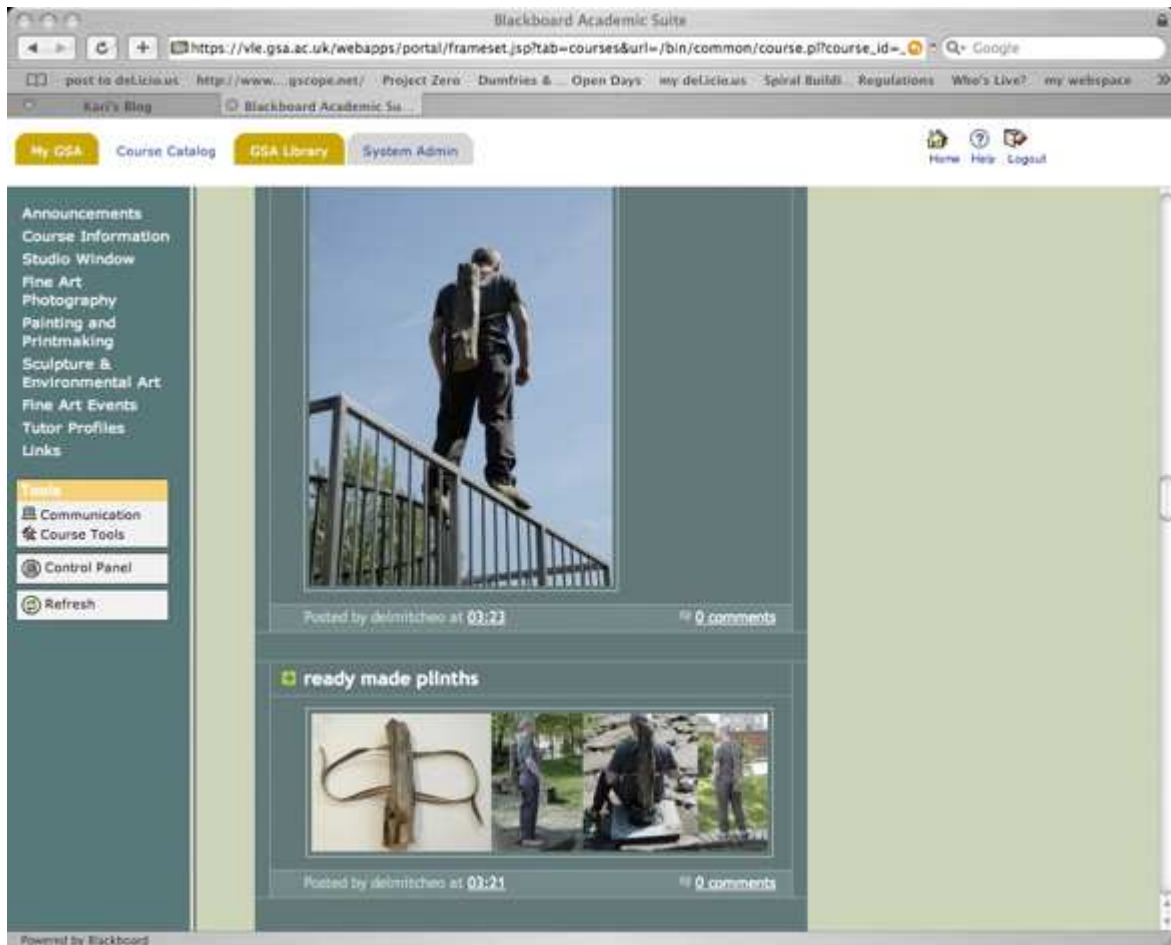


Fig. 6 A student studio blog

As students reflected on learning and shared these reflections with others, what began to emerge from this engagement with the virtual or the blog was more than the rendering of an on-line or virtual research journal. As part of the SEA studio programme, students are encouraged to go outwith the institution and make work off-site. Even though staff are aware of what the student is doing when they are out of the studio, there is still a distance.

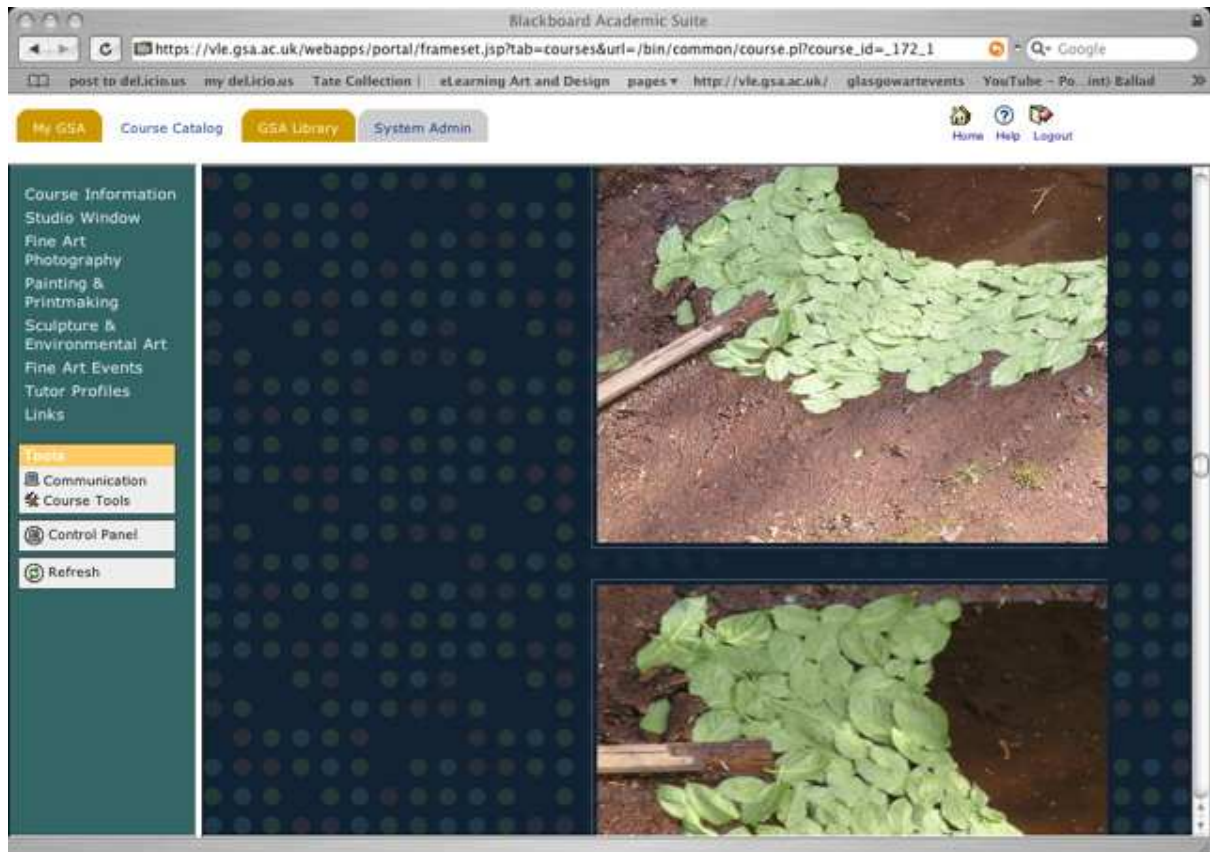


Fig. 7 Blog by student working in the landscape

However, as can be seen in Fig. 7 these different ways and sites of working were supported by the blog. In this case a student who worked with natural materials in the landscape (and hadn't initially shown interest in blogging or new media technologies), suddenly found that the *virtual* gave greater freedom to work in this way. As the student wrote:

“This blogging ideas was designed for people, like me. It has kept me a lot more organised and top of my work. I'm always out of the studio working, (and this) allows others to look at my work and give advice.”

As the project progressed and blogging increased, all of the students used the blog in very different ways in relation to the project. For some, it was as a receptacle for documentation of work, building up a rich visual resource of images. For others, it was used as a space to test out critical thinking, actively inviting dialogue and conversation around thinking, ideas, concepts and theories. The blog often became a space for students to reflect on their own practice and on the learning/teaching environment of critical feedback sessions. In these reflective instances, the blog provided a space for students to re-process and share discussion and dialogue about what had been raised and discussed during these sessions. As the following student entry demonstrates:

“Critical feedback sessions. Two-day crits for every student's final pieces. Feedback from students...contemplating how an artist/student can create a piece of work, naïve to how deeply and intelligently it can 'accidentally' be interpreted. Does that invalidate it? How do these strong pieces develop WITHOUT the deep understanding from the artist? Are our projections of meaning into the work enough? Does that mean anything can be 'art'? Or is fine art the balance of understanding how form and content affect the viewer? Although artists can NEVER fully control interpretation...”

As more students began to develop image based and reflective texts, staff were able to see and make comment on how a student was working, providing links to other areas of interest to help contextualise their practice. As the reflexive element of the blog and the potential and immediacy of response to work as it was posted grew, greater and ongoing insight to students' progress and what they were doing outwith the studio, was made possible. However, in addition to these diverse ways of engaging - developed by the student themselves - the

studio blog also became a platform or showcase space for the realisation of new works. Here, as can be seen in Fig.8, students used the virtual and its associated tools as a site for new processes of making and presentation via very simple animations that relate to and extended forms of drawing and photography, given a further and new life on the site of the VLE.



Fig. 8 Student animation on the blog

New media weblog

As joint coordinator of a Masters course in New media, how developments between practice and the virtual translated into postgraduate study became a concern to explore. The New media course had been constructed to look at technologies essentially from a theoretical perspective. However, through an interest in extending the studio dynamic, a practical dimension that involved immersion *in* media and technology was also developed. While the course still operates in the *classic* postgraduate trajectory of readings, seminars and discussions around specific texts, the development of a dedicated and public New media web site gave students space to use a personal blog as a reflective journal come sketchbook for the course. In addition to the benefits experienced as part of previous weblogs, in allowing ongoing links *with* and feedback *to* students, (who, although attending courses in the institution, due to the once a week mode of attendance, are essentially studying at a *distance*), this opened up further learning and teaching opportunities. Rather than revert to the traditional mode of the essay as assignment, students are asked to submit a series of short articles, which are posted live to the site at agreed and stated times throughout the 10 week duration of the short course. The articles are 300 words in length and have to make reference to the students' growing understanding of critical debate within the territory of New media. Each article has to have a minimum amount of hypertext and image links and reference provided texts and other academic journals in the appropriate manner.



Fig. 9 New media blog

As can be seen in Figs. 9-10, again this creates dynamic and rich reflection. In this instance we host the site on one of our own servers to ensure the safety of the assessable material. The very first posting of articles by students at these agreed time-slots was a quite amazing moment to witness. During the evening of the day of the first submission, a whole host of articles were posted, with all of those submitting instantly seeing each other's work; again, sharing and *making learning visible*. This is not something that is traditionally part of a history of art or theoretical studies programme, but edges closer to the studio, in its visibility of practice and in progress thinking. Not only were students experiencing an immediacy and access to what they and others had submitted, they – and others from within and outwith the institution - were able to make comment on and feedback to one another, decreasing the time between submission of assignments and critical feedback. In relation to learning and teaching, students not only experienced new means of assessment and feedback, but the very public nature of the internet and the New media site meant that students became acutely aware of the responsibility of the *personal* within the *public* that went with this visibility.



Fig. 10 New media student article

These projects are currently providing the building blocks for further research and development that investigates through practice, how the methods of the studio and VLE might combine and interact to create new modes and spaces of learning and assessment and importantly, sites for the production of work. This is not a one-way process - the VLE is being developed in response to the studio, however, it also adds to the learning space. What so often appears to happen in the studio is that as students become so involved or immersed in the many instances of problem-solving and points of making/creation, these moments of progression or tangents in thinking and making are not recorded or shared. Even if appearing in a sketchbook, the detail appears to be more often there for the individual than a wider group. What these virtual projects introduce are ways of building on the studio, where learning is made visible, and opens up the potential of the VLE to allow the actions of the studio - reflection, sharing, making and communality – to take shape in another space and form. More than this, as Penny (2004) suggests, if the studio and VLE can work hand in hand, where studio-based practice truly embraces the potential of “combining existing disciplines” with “new emerging contexts, new techniques and new practices”, they can become an even more powerful tool for learning and the sharing of learning experiences.

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