# Taking Art School Online in Response to COVID 19: From Rapid Response to Realising Potential

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# Abstract

In response to COVID 19 higher education worldwide underwent a rapid shift, moving learning and teaching to the online environment. This shift in pedagogy and practice fundamentally challenged a number of disciplines and disciplinary norms, none more so than studio-based art and design institutions. As a result, academic staff and those in professional service roles were required to rapidly engage with digital technologies with which they were unfamiliar, adjusting their pedagogic approach and innovating within the online environment. This article presents a small-scale study investigating the impact of this rapid change on a small specialist studio-based higher education institution which prioritises physical making and in person teaching within its educational provision. The study focused on how the shift influenced the perceptions and practices of teaching and professional support staff in their use of learning technologies and what newly adopted approaches to technology enhanced art and design education may likely continue post COVID 19.

# Introduction

The onset of the COVID 19 pandemic compelled a fundamental shift in learning and teaching across the higher education sector. Traditionally campus-based educational providers rapidly moved to online and remote teaching models in response to lockdown restrictions and requirement for social distancing. This shift in pedagogical approach fundamentally challenged a number of disciplines and disciplinary norms, none more so than those of art and design, which at their core rely upon the physically located and materially driven social practices of studio-based learning and pedagogy (Corazzo 2019; McHughes 2013).

Whilst blended, distance and technology enhanced approaches to learning and teaching in art and design are not uncommon (Logan et al. 2014), for some providers who specialise in studio-based pedagogy this shift was even more fundamental due to their privileging of face-to-face interactions through studio (Shreeve & Batchelour 2012) and limited engagement with digital learning technologies (Power & Kannara 2016).

As such, the immediate impacts of the shift to online and remote learning and teaching are only now coming into focus within educational research (JISC 2020; Rapanta et al. 2020; Souleles et al. 2020), with emerging findings within art and design contexts (Eckert 2021; Marshalsey & Sclater 2020). This study aims to further inform knowledge and understanding of the experience of such a shift in art and design, and the impacts this has had to learning and teaching, through examining the lived experiences of academic and professional service staff within the authors’ own institution.

# Challenges to studio pedagogy

Studio and studio pedagogy have been central to art and design education for over two centuries (Broadfoot & Bennett 2003). Studio, whilst still a debated territory within the research literature, is generally agreed to be a shared physical space in which students and tutors engage socially through creative practice. Students respond to problems, briefs and provocations; work in small groups or independently; learn through dialogue, interaction and through the act of making (Crowther 2013; Orr & Shreeve 2017; Park 2011; Pektas 2012; Shreeve 2011). Studio is thus both a ‘visually and materially unique learning space’ (Corazzo 2019, 1250) as well as a distinct ‘signature pedagogy’ within art and design (Shulman 2005). Therefore, in responding to the context of COVID 19, which limited access to physical studio spaces, a clear challenge was presented to art and design educators.

# Technology enhanced learning and teaching in art and design

Technology enhanced learning and teaching (TELT) is not a new innovation within art and design education (Marshalsey & Sclater 2018). Innovations with digital technologies (Barber 2011; Dreamson 2017; Lingwood & Pinny 2017), use of social media (Fleischmann 2014), blended learning (Fleischmann 2021), as well as online and distance approaches (Logan et al. 2014), have been well documented within the literature. However, engagement with TELT has been found to be ‘significantly less in the creative arts’ (Power & Kannara 2016, 7) compared to other disciplines, resulting in additional challenges for art and design educators moving into online and TELT approaches.

Park (2011) argues that key to the successful implementation of TELT in art and design has been the repositioning of academic staff in their understanding and perspectives on digital learning and the role TELT can play to support learning within these disciplines. Shreeve (2009), in her study of part-time practitioner teachers, found that staff who hold these roles resist educational related identities and, as such, are challenging to engage in professional development in learning and teaching (Beaton 2009), which we would argue is key to this repositioning. Thus, in being forced to practise within the online environment, and engage with TELT at pace, interesting questions are raised as to the impacts on educators’ pedagogical position on the use and role of TELT within art and design.

It is important to note that interventions to support staff to transition to TELT within existing research have been strategically driven changes and not responses to crisis or rapid shifts from established norms. Some research exists which explores rapid change in universities. Robertson & Olivier (2020) found that large-scale and rapid change can be effective mechanisms in overcoming academic resistance and supporting effective change management. Again, however, these large-scale and rapid-change agendas have been part of planned strategic initiative and not crisis response. Thus, comparison of the impacts and effects to educators’ perceptions and practices within existing research are limited when considered within the specific context of COVID 19 and the rapid moved to online and remote learning and teaching.

# Art and design higher education during COVID 19

There is emerging research into the impacts of COVID 19 and the rapid shift to online and remote learning and teaching within art and design. Marshalsey & Sclater (2020) report on a survey of academic staff and students' experiences during the COVID 19 pandemic, finding that moving to online and remote learning negatively impacted students’ ability to actively experiment, develop and produce creative works, and also reduced their sense of community and engagement with peers. Staff reported challenges in engaging with students’ creative practice remotely, as well as significant increases in workloads. Staff also raised concerns as to the future of studio-based learning and pedagogy, given the potential for significant shifts in educational expectations from students, industry and policy makers (Marshalsey & Sclater 2020). Eckert (2021) found similar sentiments in their survey and interviews with academic staff across European art schools, acknowledging the potentially transformative nature of the pandemic on art and design education.

In reviewing the literature, it is clear that research is only now coming into view as to the impact of the COIVD 19 pandemic on educators and their learning and teaching practice. This study aims to contribute to this evolving understanding by exploring the lived experiences of academic and professional support staff as they rapidly shifted to online and remote learning and teaching, how this has affected their perceptions of TELT, and their future learning and teaching practice. It is an important distinction that this study does not evaluate teaching within the COVID 19 context, nor specific TELT tools. As Greene (2020) argues, we must be cautious about critically evaluating the emergency response, and this study is a dispassionate analysis of the impact and potential legacy of the shift within the case study institution.

# Methods and methodology

The authors’ institution, a small specialist studio-based art school, based within the UK, and specialising within the disciplines of fine art, design and architecture was selected as a case study site in which to investigate the research questions. The institution’s primary mode of delivery is through learning and teaching within the physical studio environment, workshops, exhibitions, lectures theatres and seminar spaces. Engagement with TELT prior to the COVID 19 pandemic was predominantly focused upon enhancing usage and engagement with the virtual learning environment (VLE), supporting localised innovations within departments and programmes.

A two-phased approach to data collection was taken. Firstly, a qualitative survey was devised exploring participants’ experiences and confidence with specified TELT tools utilised within the research site prior to, and eight months into, fully online remote delivery. The survey utilised a reflective model requiring participants to identify their prior and current perceptions and usage of the VLE based upon the work of O’Leary (2002). A series of open-ended questions asked participants to explore their experiences of the shift, considering key challenges, opportunities and benefits of teaching within the online remote environment. Qualitative surveys provide a valuable method for investigating the experiences and perceptions of participants with a specific phenomenon (Cohen et al. 2018; Kelly et al. 2003; Tymms 2018), which can then be further investigated utilising more in-depth qualitative methods.

Phase 2 of data collection built upon phase 1, utilising group interviews to further explore participants lived experiences. Group interviews provide the opportunity to collectively explore participant experiences, and to considering similarities, differences and nuanced understandings (Cohen et al. 2018, 527). Participants within group interviews were drawn from survey respondents who had been asked to indicate their willingness to participate within further research activities.

# Data collection and analysis

The survey launched in November 2020 and received sixty-eight responses. All respondents identified themselves as actively teaching or working within a professional service role focused on supporting learning. Data from the survey was analysed using descriptive data visualisation (Gorard 2006) to examine changes in perceptions and confidence with TELT tools. Responses to open-ended questions were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2006) with themes identified based upon conceptual clarify, strength of concept across participant accounts and nuanced or novel participant experience (Nelson 2017).

Two group interviews were held in January 2021, with fourteen participants across disciplinary areas and professional services. Interviews were audio recorded, anonymised and transcribed into a verbatim script, then analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2006). Table 1 below provides an overview of all participants within this study.

## ***Table 1. Survey and group interview sample***

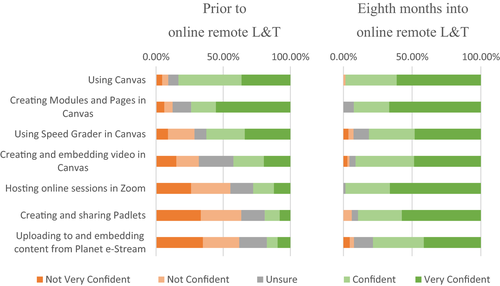
|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Discipline / Professional Service** | **Total Survey Respondent** | **Total Group Interview Participants** |
| Fine Art | 8 | 1 |
| Design | 31 | 8 |
| Architecture | 10 | 1 |
| Professional Services | 19 | 4 |
| Total | 68 | 14 |

# Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for the project was granted by the authors’ institution prior to data collection. All participants were made clear of the project’s scope and aims through a Participants Information Sheet and Consent Form. Participants were clearly advised that their participation in the study was voluntary, and they had the right to withdraw, without reason, at any time.

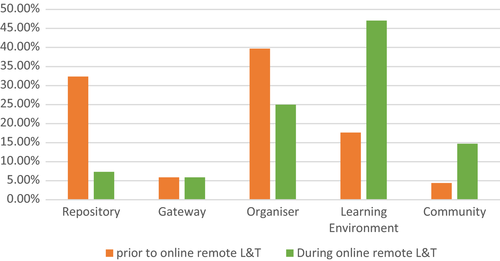
# Findings and discussion

Respondents to the phase 1 survey indicated that their perceived levels of confidence with core TELT tools had grown as a result of the rapid shift to remote online learning and teaching. All respondents indicated an increase in confidence with the most profound shift in relation to the creation and embedding of media learning resources (Canvas and Planet e-stream), and hosting online teaching sessions (Zoom), see Figure 1.

[](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/cms/asset/1c66716c-8196-45f2-9adb-ff3689e5d500/jade12384-fig-0001-m.jpg)

## ***Figure: Participant confidence with core TELT tools prior to and during online remote learning and teaching***

A large number of respondents (60%) identified a change in their use of the VLE (Canvas) with the largest change in usage from that of a repository of resources, to a more engaging tool for curriculum organisation and an environment to engage learners, see Figure 2. The remaining respondents (40%) did not identify a change in their use of the VLE, having already situated their usage within the ‘organiser’ (14%) or ‘learning environment’ (16%) definitions pre-pandemic.

[](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/cms/asset/c6be2c05-5fff-4e4e-a86d-d21ea0387938/jade12384-fig-0002-m.jpg)

## ***Figure 2: VLE usage prior to and during online remote learning and teaching***

These changes in confidence and usage indicated the potential for a repositioning in participants’ use of learning technologies, as well as in their perceptions of the value and benefits TELT can bring to studio-based education.

These areas of enquiry were further explored within the group interviews and responses to open-ended questions. These findings are presented and explored below.

## ***Experience of change***

Participants described the move to online and remote learning and teaching as providing an impetus for change in perspectives and practices with TELT, forcing more reticent colleagues to engage: ‘I think it has shown even the most reticent tutors that there are enormous benefits it [TELT] could bring to enhance many areas of our previous teaching practice’ (Architecture Tutor).

Participants described how the shift significantly increased workloads, and how a lack of time to prepare magnified the inherent difficulties of moving online. This lack of time was linked to limited opportunities to trial approaches, tools and technologies, and impacted on initial confidence. Similarly, some participants felt that the rapid production of resources limited their quality and potential future use: ‘we’ve really had to do a lot of work. And everybody will agree that the workload just shot through the roof. But one aspect of this is because we had to start from scratch. So, we really had to develop a lot of material very quickly’ (Design Tutor).

These sentiments speak of the realities of rapid change, and how it inherently requires adaptation and effort. The theme of impetus for change also linked to participants’ ideas of expectations, and how the move to remote learning and teaching had changed expectations of staff and students as to what an art and design educational offer should be moving forward. Expectations were described in relation to comparisons with other higher education providers and in relation to expectations on the disciplines to be innovative in learning and teaching. One tutor said: ‘I would think, if we're not doing it [TELT], we can’t pretend we’re practising innovation’ (Design Tutor). Another said: ‘we need to look at how [others HE providers] do things and how they deliver. The things that are really important … the model which they use to actually support learners … flexible learning approaches to work with a number of different type of people’ (Design Tutor).

These perspectives raise interesting questions as to how we define and direct our educational model and how change agendas to support such redefinitions are managed and supported. As Eckhert (2021) argues, the response to COVID 19 may provide a transformational shift in how art and design education is conceived given changing expectations of students, educators, industry and policy makes; however, we must also recognise the concerns of educators as to the potential loss of core pedagogical principles and approaches such a shift may bring (Marshalsey & Sclater 2020).

## ***Challenges encountered and losses incurred***

A persistent theme across participant accounts was that of the loss of physical, material and social aspects of learning within studio. This sense of loss was complex and multi-layered with particular nuances as to the physicality of learning, and the ways being physically co-located within studio acts as a catalyst for creative practice. Physicality and materiality within learning were expressed in relation to the physical act of engaging with materials within studio and the challenge of translating this learning into a virtual space. Similarly, the ability to encounter, and communicate learning through creative practice in the online environment was limited due to the two-dimensional nature of documenting and sharing work, and the lack of physical interactions. One tutor said: ‘The application of paint is not something you can easily learn online. There's a tactile thing here … But what I find especially challenging for hybrid learning is not necessarily being able to encounter the work in a state where I was normally used to doing that’ (Fine Art Tutor). Another said: ‘There’s a point where you can ask a question to them [students] through the physical artefact, that you just don’t get on the screen, I think that’s what I'm really pining for right now’ (Design Tutor).

Loss was also described as a loss of incidental or serendipitous opportunities for interactions which were not easily facilitated within the online environment. While some researchers find that online tools have great potential for building social engagement in studio pedagogies (Lotz et al. 2015), the use of virtual spaces to create opportunities for social interaction in this study were primarily viewed as too formal and constructed, and led to a loss of collective learning as facilitated by being in the same physical space. Loss was also described in relation to students’ limited abilities to see others’ work, their process, and the differences in perceived quality, approach and response.

What can't be replicated, even though we have tried, is the peer interaction and the learning that they get from peers, in the workshops, in the studio… They look to other people making and doing and drawing and it sets the bar, they need to have those references to respond to and it lifts the quality. (Architecture Tutor)

This sense of loss reaffirmed the socially engaged practice of learning and teaching within studio and the integral nature of encountering and communicating through creative practice in a collective and shared environment (Corazzo 2019; Orr & Shreeve 2017).

This raises interesting questions as to how this loss has impacted students in their learning, how they have adapted or not to this loss, and how this loss will influence the learning and teaching approach of staff within both the current and evolving context, as well as the new normal that will emerge post pandemic. Similarly, there are interesting questions to be asked as to how innovation and development of learning technologies, and the creation of new online or hybrid learning spaces, can support and enhance these types of serendipitous engagement in the future. These findings were similarly explored by Wragg (2020) who argued the importance of the social component of the studio, recommending that online spaces prioritise the social experience through building communities of practice, based upon social activities which are built into an online offering.

## ***Benefits afforded through the shift to online remote learning and teaching***

An overarching theme within participants’ responses was the feeling of surprise as to the unexpected affordances the shift had brought to their learning and teaching practice and the student learning experience: ‘There’s so many positives that have surprised me’ (Design Tutor).

A key benefit identified within both survey responses and group interviews were increased flexibility for both staff and students, with specific benefits to those with caring responsibilities, work commitments or specific learning needs. Participants acknowledged that pre-recorded content and live recording provide flexibility and improve access to teaching materials and resources, supporting students to review and re-engage with material which they struggled with. One said: ‘I work with students who have a lot of other commitments including work and caring responsibilities and/or health issues. Asynchronous learning opportunities have meant that they are better able to participate. Pre-recorded lectures have meant ESL [English Second Language] students benefit from subtitles and repeated viewings’ (Design Tutor).

These increased opportunities for flexibility were seen as a clear benefit to enhance accessibility for a number of participants, and highlighted an understanding of the diversity that exists within the student body and the need for differential approaches to support participation and engagement.

A number of participants recognised a need for clearer structure and support for students to achieve learning outcomes within the online environment, and this was seen as a potential affordance of the shift – providing greater clarity to learners and more scaffolded support to engage with core curriculum. One tutor said: ‘Technology has made certain aspects more organised for teaching, but also for the students to feel more prepared for activities’ (Design Tutor). Another said that there was a need for ‘breaking down learning resources into manageable chunks of content for students’ (Design Tutor).

Enhanced student engagement with learning resources, increased attendance at live teaching events (virtual) and greater engagement with peers within taught sessions was reported by a number of participants. Participants commented on improvements in the quality of work from some students, particularly in relation to documenting their creative process. Reasons for improved engagement and performance were ascribed to the flexible nature of online learning, as well as the requirement to document and share works online. However, this was clearly caveated due to perceptions that students had limited extracurricular and social opportunities due to lockdown restrictions, hence fewer alternative activities outside their programme of study. A tutor said: ‘we’ve had really healthy numbers for a lot of the postgraduate events that we’ve run, and that is really helping these links between year groups, and forging sort of peer conversations and relationships in slightly, you know, different ways’ (Architecture Tutor).

The development of digital skills and capabilities for both staff and students was discussed by participants as being a key benefit of the shift to hybrid learning and teaching. For students, this was described as giving them the opportunity to develop their digital identity, or voice, as well as engaging in practices aligned to industry: ‘the advantage of the digital skills that they're refining, that perhaps a fashion and textile student wouldn’t necessarily have. but they’re probably gaining this year [compared] with the group we had last time’ (Design Tutor).

Enhancements to student engagement and performance through use of blended learning and TELT approaches are contested in the literature (Kirkwood & Price 2014), and moves away from studio-based learning have been critiqued as negatively impacting students’ creative practice (Marshalsey & Sclater 2018). The development of industry-related practices however, are clear benefits of TELT approaches within art and design education (Fleischmann 2021). It is therefore interesting to consider how TELT can be embedded within studio-based practices and pedagogies to support industry requirements for digital skills and competencies.

Ideas of connection and the creation of new spaces for sharing within the online environment were viewed by a number of participants as positive. Participants identified the opportunity to engage students physically distant from campus within community-orientated activities such as seminars and talks, as well as in cross-institutional curricular previously unavailable due to the face-to-face nature of delivery. One tutor said: ‘My students can finally attend invited guest talks on campus. Which is something they normally can't do. And I think, for the first time, students on alternate campuses can take Glasgow based electives’ (Design Tutor)

Linked to new spaces for connecting were ideas of increased opportunities for sharing and documenting work within the online environment. For one participant in a professional service role the ability to access images of a student’s work provided new opportunities to engage with, and discuss with students, their learning and practice. This approach was viewed as an enhancement on previous approaches in which students verbalised their process and practice.

Similarly, having access to a range of students’ work through online exhibition allowed participants and their students to discuss the quality of work within the context of their cohort, and the various approaches, processes and responses to project briefs. One said: ‘in some disciplines students are posting up work for everyone to see, so students have been able to signpost me to, “Oh, this person's stuff is really good”, and “I would like to get to that place with my work”. So I think that’s been really helpful’ (Professional Support Staff). Another said: ‘Their documentation skills have gone through the roof. They are excellent this year. And that is now leading us to quite quickly putting in place a kind of the sense, that they are now building a digital portfolio’ (Design Tutor)

This theme raises interesting questions as to how these new spaces of connection and sharing are valued by staff and students, and how they can be maintained and developed post pandemic. Opportunities to further develop connection across physically distant cohorts and the sharing of practice again link to ideas within established literature on TELT in art and design (Lingwood & Pinny 2017; Logan et al. 2014).

# Conclusions

Eckert (2021) argues that the COVID 19 pandemic has the potential to be a paradigm shift for art and design higher education. There is some evidence that such a rapid and wholesale shift into the online space has provided an impetus for engagement with TELT by educators as never before. However, there is little evidence as yet as to a fundamental shift in educators’ pedagogical position and approach with TELT.

This study contributed to the evolving understanding of the impacts of COVID 19 on art and design education and provides evidence of the challenges faced by educators in moving a physically located and socially engaged studio pedagogy into the online and remote environment. It is clear from the findings of this study that there have been some benefits to this shift; however, further research is needed to understand how these benefits are assessed, and further embedded into studio-based learning, as we return to a new normal post pandemic. The experience of educators navigating this shift has also not been without consequence. There is clear evidence of increases in workload, and the pace of change required of staff being unsustainable, as well as concerns by educators of the impacts to studio-based education of the shifting expectations of students, industry and policy makers.

Given that the impacts of the COVID 19 crisis are only beginning to emerge within the educational literature, it is important to note the role of further research in understanding these impacts to educators, staff and the wider community of art and design practitioners.

# Limitations

Given the scale and scope of the sample and research site we acknowledge that generalisability within this study is not possible and as such conclusions have been drawn in relation to the sample only, with potential avenues for further research identified. Transferability of the findings and conclusions drawn within this study can however be achieved through readers’ interpretations of the findings and conclusions based upon their own lived experiences and knowledge of the phenomenon (Braun & Clarke 2006). Therefore, in acknowledging what is lost in breadth and scale in the design of this study, value is gained through nuance and interpretation to inform future research.

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# Biographies

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