



## Adapting a Strategy of Cultural Inclusion in a Pandemic A Case Study in Agile Adaptation

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[Illustration / Scientific Illustration]

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### Abstract

The master's programmes in Communication Design at The Glasgow School of Art (GSA) maintains a cohort of approximately 45-50 students of typically more than twenty nationalities. With such a culturally diverse cohort of students from a variety of prior learning experiences, promoting student cohesion is an important aspect in the student's learning experience with studio-based learning playing a key role. I presented my paper on "Cultural Diversity in a Masters Programme in Illustration: A Case Study in Internationalisation" at Confia in 2019 which presented the strategies the team had employed. During the Covid-19 Pandemic of 2020 and 2021 the teaching team at GSA had to adapt these strategies to ensure adherence to government guidelines which restricted and at points prohibited studio-based teaching. We developed an agile teaching model and a hybrid approach with online teaching combined with limited access for students to the studio and workshops, to continue to deliver the positive strategies developed to promote cultural inclusion and diversity. In this paper I will reflect on the effectiveness of those adaptations and consider lessons learned in the process.

### 1. Introduction

As was the case for most Higher Education establishments globally, the Covid-19 pandemic impacted the delivery of the master's programmes in Communication Design at GSA during academic sessions 2019/20 and 2020/21 with Government restrictions defining how programmes could be delivered. With student cohesion being an important aspect of the student experience, and studio-based learning playing a key role, my paper "Cultural Diversity in a Masters Programme in Illustration: A Case Study in Internationalisation" [1], discussed the challenges that I had identified in promoting group cohesion in a culturally diverse cohort with diverse prior learning. I explained the strategies the teaching team had developed and analysed the feedback from students and recent graduates on their effectiveness. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, GSA adopted a hybrid model of delivery with all teaching being delivered online and limited student access to the studio and workshops due to social distancing measures. Staff were required to reconsider how these principles of cultural inclusion could be implemented in a significantly different and rapidly changing environment.

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## 2. Context

The last two years have been impacted by both the Covid 19 pandemic and Brexit. The masters programmes in Communication Design at GSA typically maintains a cohort of 45-50 students, comprising of twenty or more nationalities. The Department of Education (U.K.) forecasts a 57% drop in the number of EU applicants to U.K. Universities in response to Brexit [2] resulting in a potential reduction in future European applicants.

There has been a reduction in the number of nationalities in the last two sessions: in session 2019/20, 10 nationalities in a cohort of 50 students, and session 2020/21, 13 nationalities in a cohort of 62 students. Previous graduates had identified the exposure to a broad range of different cultures, thoughts and beliefs as a key aspect of their learning, [1] so although the number of nationalities has reduced, the programmes remain diverse and developing cohesion in the group is as pertinent as ever. In contrast with prior sessions, not all students travelled to Glasgow to participate in the course and were dispersed geographically across multiple time zones.

The imposed Covid-19 pandemic restrictions on social distancing impacted studio and workshop access as well as delivery of face-to-face teaching. Staff therefore had to adapt delivery of a studio-based learning experience with severely limited access to studio and workshops, working with a geographically dispersed cohort of students across multiple time zones and promoting peer relationships in a cohort that could predominantly only interact online.

## 3. Methodology

I reviewed the pedagogic theory that had informed my original research and reflected on how the strategies previously developed might be adapted in response to the restrictions of the Covid-19 pandemic. The government restrictions on levels of permissible contact introduced constraints that were not present when carrying out the original research. Additionally, a compressed timeline to gather information limited opportunities to engage students in a feedback loop and collect data. This placed a greater emphasis on anecdotal evidence from staff and students, as well as observation and reflection by the team. Where data was available this was included to support any statements and conclusions.

Issues identified in integrating a diverse international cohort remained largely the same despite the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, namely language fluency and communication, integration of a diverse cultural group, diverse prior learning, establishing a studio culture when many students had no prior experience of studio-based learning, developing students as reflective practitioners and promoting peer learning.

I have summarized the strategies implemented and how these were adapted noting what aspects remained similar despite having moved online, and what aspects required a different approach. In my conclusion I have reflected on what adaptations were effective specific to the Covid-19 pandemic situation and what adaptations remain beneficial to future teaching and should be retained as good practice.

#### 4. Institutional Adaptation by GSA

GSA adopted a hybrid delivery model which allowed students limited access to studios, library and workshops facilities with all teaching activities delivered online. Bookable safe studio space was provided for students experiencing hardship in their living environments.

The Information Technology (IT) department developed a digital inclusion policy providing laptops to students to support online study along with access to a bookable digital hub. The Library's Learning & Teaching Technology Team developed a series of training modules for staff and students to support the delivery of online content [3]. The agile adaptation of IT and the Learning & Teaching Technology Team was commended in the 2021 Quality Assurance Agency Review of GSA [4]. The Technical Services Department (TSD) also adapted provision providing alternative solutions for students to borrow equipment to work at home along with online video tutorials by technical staff.

#### 5. Challenges Identified and Strategic Responses Employed

To comply with government guidelines and complement the institutional adaptations, the teaching team reflected on how we could address challenges the Covid-19 pandemic presented while maintaining the learning experience that had previously been developed to support student learning and cultural inclusion on the programmes. The challenges identified included the following:

##### 5.1. Establishing a Studio Culture with Limited Studio Access

The Studio had been identified as a key element to student learning at GSA. The 2018 GSA Strategic Plan highlights the importance of studio learning:

“Studio provides this learning environment. It is the environment for inter-disciplinary, peer learning, critical enquiry, experimentation and prototyping, has particular relevance in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and is the foundation of our student experience” [5].

However, all teaching would be delivered online to ensure that programmes could be delivered regardless of the level of Covid-19 pandemic restrictions. My previous paper [1] had identified that many of the students beginning their study on the masters' programmes had no prior experience of studio-based learning and diverse prior learning, including purely theoretical undergraduate study. This presented challenges to establishing a studio culture when students had severely restricted or no access to a physical studio. The activities that would normally happen organically in a studio-based learning environment had to be replaced by constructed activities that allowed students to have a comparable experience in developing peer support, critical enquiry and the cultural integration of the cohort through shared projects. Boud (Boud, 2001) [6] states “that being able to give and receive constructive feedback is an important ability in most fields, but it is critical in the professional practice of design”.

To help establish a studio culture the team devised a project called 'Showroom'. This was the students first project and invited students to address what is normally their final task at the end of their study: to plan, curate and produce an exhibition with the intention to reframe their living space as a creative making space and gallery. The students were provided with a choice of themes to respond to; domestic life, rules and restrictions, collections & collecting. The briefing introduced students to alternative approaches to exhibitions including examples by Ficciones Tipografika, Glasgow Open House Festival (DIY Arts Festival), Wizard Gallery, and Jess Scott (The Staircase Gallery).

The 'Showroom' exhibitions were documented and shared online with staff and peers. Students were required to consider all aspects of the exhibition including collaterals such as invites, a gallery text and captions. Partners were assigned to write a review and present their partners exhibition to the wider cohort. This promoted discussion with peers at a one-to-one level, while the wider group provided feedback as comments on Padlet (an online visual notice board). Student responses were diverse. Claude Foulquie produced an exhibition entitled 'Conjuring Home' an exhibition of small animal totems and collected natural objects that informed a series of drawings as a shamanic practice to re-connect Claude with their home in rural France. Giulia Saporito's 'The City as a Multicultural Garden' commented on the cultural diversity of Glasgow by collecting, cataloguing, and documenting non-native plants, found around Glasgow's culturally diverse Southside, and printing the plants as a series of monoprints to comment on cultural diversity and integration in society. Sally Mairs appropriated the language of galleries, which were closed due to the Covid-19 pandemic, in 'Do Not Touch', an ironic comment on the restrictions on human contact during the Covid-19 pandemic. Other institutions hosted similar alternative exhibitions including the 'Edible Degree Show: Interactive Art in a Series of Fridges', by BA Fine Art students at Liverpool's John Moore University curated by Programme Leader Rory Macbeth, highlighting the fridge door as an exhibition space and the fact that many students had spent a year primarily indoors [7]. The 'Showroom' project helped to establish many of the aspects of the learning that would normally be experienced in studio-based learning environment. It is apparent from the examples cited above, and from other student responses to the 'Showroom' brief, that students were able to adapt and create work, at times inspired by the Covid-19 pandemic restrictions that involved looking at the opportunities to make and present work despite the lack of a physical studio.

Subsequent project briefs were discipline specific and designed to bring smaller groups of around 5-11 students together as a support network. This provided an identifiable group of peers within the same discipline to discuss ideas with and receive support. When studio and workshop access was possible, students were assigned access days with peers from the same discipline group to develop peer relations in the physical studio as well as online.

The department initiated a series of talks by former graduates to share their experience called ZQ+A (Zoom Q+A). Speakers included very recent graduates discussing establishing their professional careers during

the Covid-19 pandemic, while others were established practitioners discussing their practice. This activity would normally be part of the studio experience of Visiting Lecturers' and industry talks, developed to stimulate peer discussions and promoted a sense of community among students while also providing professional practice insights.

## **5.2. Integrating a Geographically Dispersed Cohort across Multiple Timezones.**

Many students arrived in Glasgow in September 2020 ready to begin their study but others had elected to remain in their home countries due to the risks of the Covid-19 pandemic, international travel restrictions, local lockdown measures and parental concerns about infection rates in the UK. This resulted in a geographically dispersed cohort across multiple time zones from the USA to China. This presented an additional challenge to establishing an integrated cohort. For those who elected to study remotely in their home country, this may have reduced the impact identified by Sovic (Sovic, 2008) [8] as 'culture shock' and 'academic shock' in adjusting to a different culture and education system, but these students were also not able to experience a different culture or the changes it may have precipitated, as a positive experience. The aspect of 'academic shock' with students from diverse prior learning remained present for both international and UK students and was addressed in the 'Showroom' and discipline specific projects developed to establish a studio culture.

In the Higher Education Academy (HEA) Teaching International Students Study (Carroll, J., 2011) [9] group activities are identified as having a positive impact in integrating international students. Activities in Semester 1 are designed to provide these shared experiences to build group cohesion. To achieve the integration of a geographically diverse cohort, activities were scheduled to allow the maximum inclusion possible and ensure a parity of experience for all students. Submissions for assessment all digital to ensure that students studying remotely were not disadvantaged in achieving the intended learning outcomes (ILOs) through a lack of access to workshops, studio, or other campus facilities. Tutorials were scheduled to take account of local time zone whilst the use of Padlets allowed students to post work for peers and staff to provide asynchronous feedback. Students' recorded presentations replaced the previous physical presentations. This allowed students to prepare presentations without the pressure of a 'live' performance and was beneficial to ESL students reducing the anxiety associated with a live delivery and allowed them to benchmark their progress with peers, something that would happen naturally in the studio environment. Regular feedback was provided in group tutorials, formative assessments, and one-to-one tutorials to ensure students did not feel isolated or unsupported in their study.

Technical workshops were delivered as online video presentations and lectures were scheduled for maximum accessibility and recorded where possible for further review or asynchronous viewing if the student was unable to attend in real time. As the restrictions relaxed and limited physical access to workshops, studio and other campus facilities became

possible, more students elected to be based in Glasgow to take advantage of the increased access, however, to ensure parity with those not in Glasgow the team continued to deliver teaching activities online as before. It was notable that in the latter part of semester 3 that some students experienced an observable dip in motivation which staff associated with 'zoom fatigue' having studied for a year online. This would normally be the point when student demonstrate an increase in motivation and focus as they work towards their final submission. Staff encouraged students through tutorials and feedback at presentations and on Padlet to maintain their focus in the final weeks prior to submission.

### **5.3. Providing Opportunities to Develop Confidence with Language**

The social restrictions of the Covid-19 pandemic limited opportunities for international students to practice their language skills and build fluency with discipline specific terminology and theoretical language. Language fluency had been identified as an issue by both native English speaking students and English as a Second Language (ESL) international students previously[1]. In the previous paper [1] the native English speakers reported frustration with the pace of the discussion in group tutorials while the ESL students struggled with their inability to fully express and communicate their ideas.

During recruitment for the current session, the required language level (IELTS) were increased which had a notable benefit to group discussions and peer learning. Pre-session English programmes were introduced at GSA in the previous session which had the benefit of improving ESL students' language skills and familiarising students with design specific terminology, and also introduced students from non-arts based prior study to key concepts such as the studio critique.

Previously staff had actively disrupted students forming clusters with students from the same culture in the physical studio, by allocating desks in the initial semester to encourage student engagement with peers from other cultures to develop language skills and cultural integration. Staff observed that any single nationality cluster tended to default to their first language which had a negative impact on the wider group cohesion. This act of social disruption forced students to exercise their language skills with peers from a range of cultures. The team adapted this tactic by placing students in online groups with a range of nationalities for any group discussion or activity. During the 'Showroom' project, peers reviewing another students exhibition were deliberately paired with students from another culture to force one-to-one discussion prior to presenting to the group to develop fluency and design specific terminology in English. To present the ideas of their peers accurately, the students had to engage in a depth of discussion on a one-to-one basis where terminology and design specific language were discussed in relation to the peer's exhibition. This forced an active engagement as opposed to avoidance due to lack of confidence in language skills in group discussions.

### 5.4. Promotion of Peer Learning

The programmes place an emphasis on peer learning. Previously the studio had provided the environment for students to develop peer relationships. As (Budge, Beale & Lynas, 2013) point out “a social aspect to developing creativity in design involves seeking and giving peer feedback. Peer feedback and critique is integral to the creativity of designers” [10].

To promote peer feedback a community Padlet was established with events posted regularly by staff and students, this included design talks, design related articles, videos, podcasts and other events, such as the illustration mentoring scheme offered by New York Times Art Director Deanna Donegan and the ‘coffee break’ interviews by illustrator Oliver Jeffers. Many of the ‘live’ events online were free in a spirit of Covid-19 pandemic unity. Galleries which were physically closed to the public published online material and virtual exhibitions. These events replaced the openings, artists’ talks, and design festivals that students would normally experience in addition to the curriculum that provide a shared experience and points for discussion with peers.

Group tutorials allowed for peer interaction and discussion. These were extended to include peer-led group tutorials. In previous year groups, a student-led Salon model had been adopted. This adaptation to peer-led group tutorials allowed for comparable interaction. The students responded well to the peer-led group tutorials finding the open discussion with peers useful. Staff deliberately did not allocate a lead role which could have been detrimental to the peer-led nature of the group and would have placed the responsibility for the success of the group tutorial onto an individual rather than the group. Staff experimented with fully handing over the management of the peer-led tutorials to students, but these were less successful with notably less students attending when the staff were not involved in posting the announcements as peer-led group tutorials were perceived as ‘optional’. The feedback from students was very positive and resulted in additional peer-led tutorials being added to the schedule. The students valued the time with peers to discuss their ideas and projects, especially in the absence of a studio-based experience. Though the student-posted, peer-led group tutorials were less successful at engagement as a cohort, the peer-led groups did prompt students to arrange meetings directly with their discipline specific peers for discussion and support.

### 5.5. Development of the Critical Reflective Journal (CRJ)

Previously the CRJ was delivered through a series of discursive seminars involving group activities. This requires students to critically analyse and reflect on their own work and learning and be able to identify their position as a reflective practitioner [11]. within the wider field of Communication Design, informed by theory and a knowledge of historical and contemporary practice.

The series of seminars and discursive group activities were designed to support students in developing self-directed study appropriate to master’s level and to develop their critical reflection as practitioners.

The seminars were delivered online but the normal discursive group activities were not ideally suited to online delivery which would have resulted in a more passive mode of delivery and less student engagement. The team adapted the seminars to include more reflective writing tasks to replace the previous discursive group activities. Though no longer a group activity, this helped to contextualise the critical reflective journal alongside the students ongoing practice. Workshops in layout and editorial design were provided to consider how to effectively communicate content. Students were introduced to a range of reflective models including Kolb, Gibbs, and Rolffe to assist with these reflective writing tasks. The tasks were set as an asynchronous task that could be completed and posted on Padlet for review by staff and peers. The regular setting of reflective writing tasks ensured that the CRJ was an active document and ensured that students maintained a reflective practice as they created their work informing their practice, rather than a retrospective justification of the approach adopted. This adaptation proved to be effective and will be integrated into future CRJ developments.

## **5.6. The Impact of Covid-19 Pandemic on Student Anxiety/Mental Health**

Staff briefed students prior to arrival in the UK of the current quarantine rules to support students during their quarantine period. Students in the UK were encouraged to engage safely with fellow students in both the virtual and physical world while some students shared common living accommodation and had a ready-made social bubble. Staff had trained in Scottish Mental Health First Aid (SMHFA) and were aware of the symptoms associated with mental health issues and able to identify struggling students. This allowed staff to direct students to the appropriate support services and make suitable adjustments to support those experiencing anxiety or mental health issues. To ensure that they were supported, staff developed communications with student welfare whilst maintaining confidentiality. This helped to ensure students received support in a timely manner. 24 Hour online helpline support was publicised to students.

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on students anxiety levels and mental health was explicitly declared to staff in tutorials and the reflective writing exercises. It was also evident in an increase in the number of 'good cause' applications that cited anxiety and other mental health issues impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. This impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on students well-being was highlighted in The Guardian which stated "57% of students (in the UK) noted worsening mental health and well-being during Covid-19" [12].

Staff acted proactively throughout the year to be mindful relative to the additional stresses the Covid-19 pandemic placed on students well-being and mental health. Due to the confidential nature of student well-being there is no recorded data to indicate how effective staff actions were other than anecdotal feedback and the record of the number of good cause submissions in session 2020/21.



### 5.7. Developing Communication with Students

Communication between the institution of GSA and students had been raised as an issue in student surveys and highlighted through student feedback mechanisms prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. It was therefore essential that there was clear and transparent communication with students to reassure minimise levels of anxiety [4].

GSA addressed this issue through regular meetings open to all students but primarily attended by student class representatives and lead reps for the School of Design. This provided a forum to hear students' concerns and enter into a dialogue to resolve issues promptly. A Student Liason Forum was established to meet with student reps and staff on a fortnightly basis to continue the dialogue whilst the Deputy Director met with student reps on a regular basis to listen to any concerns and explore possible solutions. The student representatives indicated they appreciated these positive steps towards improving communications between staff and students in the School of Design and with the Directorate of GSA.

Communication at a programme level was also increased through regular scheduled briefings with the student cohort and class representative. This provided opportunities for students to declare their concerns or any other aspect that was impacting their study.

### 5.8. The Challenges Facing Staff Directly

The challenges facing staff were also considered. This included the additional tasks involved in delivering content online while working from home. The ongoing adaptation and planning for delivery over a prolonged period often involved not just one plan, but multiple plans and variations for a range of possible scenarios. A UCU survey of 12,000 academics featured in The Guardian reported that 57.5% of staff reported an increased workload due to additional work tasks and an increased pastoral role [13] which had increased significantly during the pandemic as evidenced in recent research by The University of Glasgow and The Samaritans [14]. Staff reported feeling mentally and physically fatigued at the end of a day teaching online. To address this fatigue online and offline tasks were alternated to ensure opportunities for respite in a teaching day. Staff appreciated the adjustments made and acknowledgement of the impact of online fatigue.

## 6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the strategies developed ensured that staff delivered the programmes to achieve the Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs) with parity of delivery. Staff were able to establish cultural inclusion in an internationally diverse cohort during the unusual conditions enforced on staff and students by the Covid-19 pandemic. Evidence to support this conclusion are at present largely anecdotal but include feedback from staff and students. Staff observed high levels of student engagement with the set tasks, projects and discussions on Padlet. Students provided verbal and written feedback reflecting on their learning experience over the last year on Padlets and in the written tasks for the CRJ, which also express the difficulties they experienced as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic on their learning experience and well-being.

Collaborations that would normally be present in previous years, that demonstrated a level of group cohesion across a diverse international group, were also present in session 2020/21 with Illustration students from a range of cultural backgrounds collaborating on two collective publications and the plans for the cohort to exhibit in Glasgow.

Many aspects of technical delivery were improved by an online asynchronous mode of delivery that allowed students more detailed observation than would have been possible in a larger physical group, the opportunity to access content anytime and revisit content to consolidate their learning, was especially beneficial to ESL students. Lecture based activities worked more efficiently online without the competition for lecture space bookings and breakout rooms providing a vehicle for smaller group discussions. The peer-led group tutorials worked effectively and were valued by students. This suggests opportunities in the future for more student led activities to inform the curriculum, a theme that was also identified in the QAA report [4]. The introduction of the creative writing tasks throughout the semester encouraged students to engage with the CRJ as a 'live' document and are planned to be continued as good practice in future sessions.

Many existing activities developed to promote group cohesion remain best suited to a physical studio-based learning environment that supports inter-disciplinary, peer learning, critical enquiry, and experimentation within a physical space. This allows for the exploration of ideas in ways not possible in most student accommodation. Online tutorials at times could be difficult when explaining aspects that would easily be communicated by a pencil and paper in real life and when reviewing sketchbooks or development work. The material qualities of making could not be fully explained online without students experiencing the physicality of those materials. The social aspect of contact with peers in the studio is also a significant benefit to students' mental health and well-being. As we look to a possible return to a studio-based learning environment, the Covid-19 pandemic has forced significant shifts in delivery models in higher education which would suggest a more blended learning delivery model for universities has been accelerated through the pandemic experience [15].

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