

# Spark: UAL Creative Teaching and Learning Journal

## Editorial

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### Introduction

Slowly the dust is beginning to settle after nearly two years of the Covid pandemic and the university sector is starting to step back and assess the repercussions of the enforced changes that took place during this time (Jordan and Jones, 2021; Syska, 2021). Weller (2022) even uses a metaphor to explain the shift to online teaching, comparing the shark in the film *Jaws* to the Covid virus. The shark like Covid caused significant disruption to everyday life and required a rapid emergency response. This shift to “emergency remote teaching” (Hodges *et al.*, 2020) throughout higher education was a change that few had predicted. Within an incredibly short period of time, university teaching moved almost exclusively online. This change was even more pronounced in an arts-based institution like the University of the Arts London (UAL) where so much of the teaching is based in physical spaces and workshops. This special edition of *Spark* aims to capture some of the changes that UAL staff developed as a response to these exceptional times.

UAL’s teaching staff had to reinvent the ways they worked and had to overcome many issues that the new online environment brought up. These case studies, provocations and research articles provide insight into how UAL’s teaching and support staff engaged with these issues in meaningful and productive ways. All the contributors include practical recommendations in relation to the topics they address and the type of teaching that will follow in the future.

The articles that make up this special edition represent a range of perspectives and experiences during the pandemic. Three main themes emerged out of the articles that were submitted for this edition. The first theme related to the immediate transition to online teaching. How could physical, tactile teaching move into virtual spaces? A second important topic of discussion during the lockdown was the issue of teacher presence and student belonging. How could presence and belonging be built into new modes of learning? Thirdly, tutors began to look for new ways of developing collaborative learning in online teaching. What type of platforms were needed to facilitate this type of synchronous learning? The following articles really do reflect the creativity and innovation that is so prevalent across the colleges at UAL.

### The transition to fully online

Clare Lomas and Maria Costantino’s article on ‘Teaching the Tangible Remotely’ eloquently describes the process of moving their Fashion and Materials Culture (FaMC) project from on campus delivery to a fully online teaching experience. The really interesting aspect of FaMC project teaching is that it is based around object-based learning where students have been used to both seeing and touching the objects they are analysing. Moving object-based learning into the online environment was not a simple process, but their experience did start to dispel some popular myths that this type of learning couldn’t be done online. They did this through careful and planned learning design interventions, such as, “deliberate ‘building in’ of pause or ‘stop and think’ points in the online delivery” that resulted in wider student participation. These interventions will be of interest to all art and design educators using physical products in their online teaching.

Stacey Leigh Ross and Lee Leewis' article entitled 'Home sweet home' breaks the conventions of a traditional academic article. Rather than a straightforward narrative, the article is written as conversation between the two authors. This is a good example of how a tutor delivering the course and a Senior Digital Coordinator from the Digital Learning Team came together during lockdown to move their course into a fully online mode. Their conversations reflect on how they used Miro in their teaching to build a sense of presence and belonging in these digital spaces. They give some practical examples of how they did this in Miro to create "a sense of ownership over the space...like having a physical studio in college". Their conversation goes much further, incorporating the need for "love and emotions", music, connection and co-creation into their teaching.

### **Presence and belonging**

One of the biggest issues that has emerged out of the enforced "emergency remote teaching" has been how students establish a sense of belonging in these virtual spaces and how they could meet and socialise informally online. There are four articles closely related to this issue. Crimson O'Shea's article on 'Digital hubs' describes the process of setting up informal meeting spaces in Microsoft Teams so that students could get together and develop a sense of community on their course. These 'hubs' were initially places set up by the tutors but then run and organised by the students. They enabled students to work together on joint projects but also provided a place to get to know each other and make connections.

'Teaching in the Time of Coronavirus: A Study of Blended Learning and Online Teaching at London College of Fashion' by Matti Juutilainen looks at the issue of social presence through the lens of an established community of inquiry framework. Based on interviews with tutors and technicians Matti discusses the ways student trust can be built with digital tools such as Padlet and Miro. He then goes on to discuss the challenges of developing this level of trust with students and how staff had practical solutions to meet these challenges, encouraging informal activities and group support sessions.

Lee Campbell's article, 'Digital pedagogies open studio: Disruptions, interventions and techno-empathy', explores the notion of 'techno-participation' and 'techno-empathy' to disrupt digital spaces and decrease students' sense of isolation. Lee invited members of UAL's LGBTQIA+ student network to attend one of his Zoom poetry performances and then explored the notion of empathy with the participants. This brought up a number of issues "arising from how inclusive (or not) online experience is, what are the limits of that, how students feel more comfortable to engage online without the camera and just be able to engage through the chat, how it builds a community, how it builds this vulnerability for both staff and students". This has led to further research exploring how to build connections between students and tutors using empathy in their artistic practices both online and with face-to face audiences.

'The cathartic function of drawing where you shouldn't' by Graeme Spurr explores the connections between everyday graffiti seen in North London and students' drawings on PowerPoint slides in the 'liminal' online spaces before lessons start. Graeme's argument in this short article is that if we allow students to mark or scribble their own ideas or images into an online space, they are not destroying that space but adding to it, often in very creative and innovative ways: "If we allow students to engage with material in ways that might be seen as disruptive, we engage in trust, openness, and collaboration with them, and we also importantly allow a cathartic function that can channel frustrations, conflicts, and other tensions into aesthetic outlets".

The final article related to this overall theme of online presence and belonging is 'Embracing the silence: Introverted learning and the online classroom' by Karen Harris. Most research related to introverted learners (and so called 'lurkers') has been focused on how to increase their engagement

and participation in the classroom. Karen takes a completely different perspective and sets out three provocations that position the issue quite differently. She proposes that the pressure to actively participate could actually be counterproductive, especially for introverted learners. Indeed, being still and inactive in classroom can encourage clear thinking and creativity, where silence and privacy might actually be a positive for certain students. These provocations ask us to question our assumptions about student engagement and participation in both the online and physical classroom.

### **Collaboration**

Another issue that emerged during the lockdown was the desire for students to work collaboratively in digital spaces. Two tools that enabled this were Padlet and Miro. 'Introducing technical architecture digitally' by Ciaran Malik focuses on how Miro was used during the lockdown to teach Architecture students remotely. Firstly, Ciaran describes the digital ecosystem of the whole course, which includes Moodle, Padlet, Blackboard Collaborate and Miro. Next, he describes a 'spiral curriculum' that underpins the course team's teaching approach and how this is related to the use of Miro. Through this process he highlights the benefits of using this visual tool so that students can share their work with fellow students and use it to illustrate their discussions with their design and technical tutors. Dan Bernstein's article, "'Seeing other examples has helped a bit": Using Padlet in academic English classes at the art and design university' discusses the use of Padlet as a collaborative tool when teaching English to overseas students. In this article Dan gives four practical examples of different activities he has used with his students using Padlet and then goes on to highlight some of its benefits.

Whilst the Covid pandemic forced us to rethink digital education, other events in the wider world, such as the murder of George Floyd prompted us to think and act on the impact that racism and colonialism in our institutions. 'UAL Decolonising Wikipedia: Opportunities for Digital Knowledge Activism' is written by two students, Ana Blumenkron and Alex Goodall with Lucy Panesar is a good example of critical digital pedagogy in practice. During in-person and online events, tutors and students worked together editing Wikipedia to decolonise its content and forming the Decolonising Wikipedia Network (DWN). The article is an inspiring read as it shows how digital education can have a positive impact beyond the classroom as a means to promote wider social justice.

The final article, 'Talking Higher Education: Starting a Podcast in the pandemic', by Santanu Vasant is a short case study describing his experience of setting up a podcast series aimed at professionals across the HE sector. It will be of interest to anyone thinking of setting up and creating their own podcasts.

### **Conclusion**

Teaching has now returned to the campuses but it will be interesting to see what the future will hold for digital education. The purpose of this edition is not to make speculations about the future, these are notoriously fraught when it comes to predicting the future of educational technology but to provide some reflections on the Covid experience. The period of lockdown did expose some of the fragilities that exist within UK Higher Education, such as the overdependence on income generated by overseas students or the instability of the institutional infrastructures (Weller, 2022; Hadjianastasis, 2021). However, the articles in this edition highlights what can be done in a short period of time. They show how educators have moved their teaching to new and creative ways of delivery, whilst addressing some of the difficulties of online education, such as presence, belonging and collaboration. The lessons learnt from these experiences will give us new and inspirational ideas of how an arts-based education can be fully realised in a post-pandemic digital world.

## References

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## Biography

Chris Rowell is Senior Digital Learning Coordinator at UAL, working with colleagues across the university to support digital pedagogies. He is also a member of ALT, the Association of Learning Technologists. He has co-edited a book on *Critical Digital Pedagogy for Higher Education*, which came out in 2022.