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Developing Academic Writing Skills in Art and Design through Blogging

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Abstract

In the creative disciplines of Art and Design, students need to develop the ability to critically assess and put into words what they feel, think and know about their working practices (and by extension their work). The careful development of the transition between knowing instinctively, thinking and writing is well established in the literature (e.g. Schön 1983 and 1987, and Biggs 2004), but only little has been done to integrate this into the Higher Education curriculum using writing as a tool for making the reflection explicit. In order to find out whether exploratory writing in the form of blog posts has the potential to allow Art and Design students to develop their academic practice, a small scale pilot project integrated blogging tasks into introductory modules of four first year undergraduate courses. Student feedback on their experience of blogging, and particularly their perceptions of the value of blogging as exploratory writing, gained through end of module questionnaires is analysed to investigate the potential to use writing to develop their academic practice. Findings indicate that it is the motivation of students that is crucial to allow students to see writing as a thinking process and developmental tool for their practical work, rather than as an unrelated academic outcome.

Introduction

Disciplines that are concerned with creative studio practice, such as 3 Dimensional Design, Fine Art or Animation, occupy a potentially problematic space in Higher Education today. Students join these courses, which can be found in the areas of Art, Design and Media, because they want to learn how to make a particular type of outcome – for example products in 3D Design, works of art in Fine Art or animated films in Animation. What students are often less enthusiastic about is the academic portion of an undergraduate degree, which in these courses is usually taught through an element of contextual studies. A particular issue is the requirement of courses to include academic essays and reports in the mix of assessment strategies. While students (and practitioners) in creative, studio-based disciplines usually do write in sketchbooks or reflective journals (or a hybrid of the two), writing up research in accordance with academic conventions is often seen as not just a challenge by undergraduate students, but also as something that has little to do with their discipline and that, often, makes little sense to them apart from being an academic requirement towards securing a degree. The purpose of this paper is to explore whether a weblog (blog) has the potential to build on the types of notes students (and practitioners) take in the course of their practice (i.e. in the sketchbooks, etc.) in order to prepare and improve the students' academic writing.

In order to test the hypothesis that regular blogging can help students develop their academic writing skills, the context of the relationship between theory and practice in Art and Design education will be introduced briefly. Particular attention will be paid to the devices and strategies that use informal writing in creative studio-based disciplines, such as sketchbooks or reflective journals. The paper will then report the results of a pilot study that ran in different disciplines at Staffordshire University. In the first stage of the study, blogging tasks were integrated into an introductory module running for first year 3D Design students. In the second stage, the scope was widened to gain insights from the Fine Art, Animation, and Visual Effects and Concept Arts (VFX) cohorts. Feedback from students in these

modules will constitute the data on which conclusions about the effectiveness of this practice can be deduced. This paper will conclude that there is little difference as to how blogging is perceived as space for independent exploratory writing by students from the areas of Design, Art or Media. It will argue that the motivation of students to engage is crucial, as is their understanding of writing as a thinking process rather than just an outcome specific to the academic context.

Theory and Practice in Art and Design Higher Education

In Art and Design courses, there is often the perception that a gap exists between two kinds of modules: *theoretical* modules on the one hand and studio-based, *practical* modules on the other. The former type aims to put individual practice in a larger, more objective context. Such modules are concerned with critical thinking, theory and history. Here competencies are built by stepping away from the individual practice and interrogating it with skills that are not subject specific, but transferable, such as reading and writing about the discipline. Meanwhile, in the 'practical' modules, students develop their expertise by doing: they are participants, not audience. Skills learned in this context are developed through experimentation with suitable materials as well as instruction that builds up an intuitive, subjective approach to work that Schön (1983) referred to as 'reflection-in-action'.

The place of the theoretical modules can be mapped onto the step of 'Abstract Conceptualisation', as proposed in Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle (1984). A similar distinction has been made by Schön (1983 and 1987) in his concept of 'reflection-on-action', which complements the 'reflection-in-action' by allowing the practitioner to step back from the immediacy of practice and reflect on it with a different perspective (cf. Cunliffe's 2005, analysis of 'knowing how' and 'knowing that'). It can be argued that it is this step that adds value to a university degree in the creative arts as opposed to more vocational training. If the step of 'Abstract Conceptualisation' is missing, there is not any basis for academic research. What results is what Adamson calls 'amateur activity', amateur due to its 'lack of critical distance from the object of design.' (2007: 139) Adamson's assertion ties in to an observation Friedman made in 2000 about Art and Design education:

The problem we face today is that arts and crafts training – and design training in the art schools – is rooted neither in the rich craft tradition nor in the research tradition of the universities. This gives rise to a culture of people who mistake silence for tacit knowledge and confuses unreflective assertion with reflective practice. (Friedman 2000: 12)

The theories of Kolb, Schön, Cunliffe and Adamson all converge on the fact that, while it is possible to go from observation to experimentation and become a capable technician, including abstract conceptualisation in the process can unlock the potential to become an excellent artist, craftsman or designer – and this is one of the main reasons for studying a creative practice subject at university.

'Off-Loading'

An important strategy for rigorous reflection is what McAleese (1999) describes as 'off-loading': externalising thoughts, ideas and research about the progress of practice (as well as of the learning experience) in order to use it as a base for further development. There are a number of reasons why the externalisation of ideas and feelings (tacit knowledge) is important in both Art and Design education as well as practice and research, as for example discussed by Gray and Malins (2004: 35–65) or in the work on communities of practice by Wenger, White and Smith, where it is argued that 'the polarity of participation and reification is a process of meaning-making that is fundamental to the learning theory underlying the concept of communities of practice' (2009: 57; cf. Wenger 1998).

Biggs' (2004) distinction between ineffable, tacit and explicit knowledge suggests that the turning point is externalisation – the ability to share processes and practice. As Friedman states, 'Explanatory power is [...] the fuel of better practice' (2000: 17). Moving from the subjective reflection-in-action, which might not be possible to communicate through words, to a more objective reflection-on-action,

which is explicit and can be expressed through words, helps develop the critical perspective needed to integrate the abstract conceptualisation stage into the research process.

This approach is not new to (academic) writing skills developers, but is the cornerstone of the 'Writing-to-Learn' approach (WTL). WTL was developed as a pedagogical approach by Britton and Emig in the mid 1960s, and focuses on using writing for exploring and reflecting upon ideas, rather than on its transactional or poetic functions (Bazerman, *et al.* 2005). Bean (2011: 121), for example, states:

From my more than forty years of college teaching, I have concluded that my single most valuable teaching strategy for promoting critical thinking is to require regular exploratory writing in response to disciplinary problems that I provide.

This strategy could be seen as another way of 'off-loading'. It uses writing not to communicate, but as a tool to help develop and organise thought.

The traditional tools for this 'off-loading' in Art and Design are the sketchbooks and reflective journals, that are very much part of the development work of the individual practitioners. Higher Education students keep these types of 'off-loading' devices almost as a matter of course; however, these are very private documents, more concerned with the tacit part of the knowledge spectrum, the reflection-in-action. When using the work contained in these sketchbooks and journals to prepare academic writing, moving from reflection-in-action to reflection-on-action can seem like a rather big leap, which often results in purely descriptive essays, the 'unreflective assertion' that Friedman complained about (2000: 12).

Creative studio based disciplines in Higher Education could benefit from including a stage on their teaching and learning strategies that scaffold students in their step from reflection-in to reflection-on-action, from their practical to their theoretical work.

The Opportunities and Challenges of Using Blogs as an 'Off-loading' Device

This research aims to find out whether the off-loading process could be extended by providing another step of exploring the gained knowledge in the linguistic spectrum – regular written exploratory tasks that are designed to support the research process leading to an academic essay. Web 2.0 has made a tool available that could be used as an 'off-loading' device for students of Art and Design disciplines: the weblog (blog).

A blog seems to be an ideal extension of more traditional 'off-loading' devices. By default organised in a chronological fashion like a journal, a blog has the potential to serve in multiple ways: as digital archive for both practical work (for example with images or video files to keep track of work in progress) and secondary research (with hyperlinks to sources if available), as well as a reflective space (Gröppel-Wegener 2010). Assigning categories and tags to posts offers the opportunities to search and organise content easily. And while the commenting function allows for interaction with readers, 'the emphasis is on individual identity through the voice of the author(s)' (Wenger, White and Smith 2009: 64). What is more, the option of making posts public allows for the building of a public professional persona that can be used as both a marketing tool and the seed for a community of practice, turning this into an 'authentic' activity of situated pedagogy – not just something students have to do for the course, but something that might become an integral part of their working lives once they are working in their chosen field after leaving university.

Methods

In order to explore the potential of blogging in Art and Design Higher Education, a small scale pilot project was put in place at Staffordshire University. There were two stages: stage 1 used a student cohort in 3D Design; stage 2 used the student cohorts in Fine Art, Animation and VFX. All four cohorts were engaged in a similar module in their first year (Animation and VFX sharing the same module) that aims to give them an introduction to research and academic writing skills and is assessed through an academic essay.

The reason that the pilot project was split into two stages was that these modules do not run in the same term. 3D Design students take their module in term 2, while Fine Art, Animation and VFX students take their respective modules in term 1. Starting the research with the 3D Design cohort allowed for the evaluation of data during the summer and, consequently, meant that the running of the project could be adjusted to respond to any interim findings.

In order to allow the reader to understand the stages clearly, stages 1 and 2 are here discussed in chronological order, before a discussion of the project as a whole.

Pilot project – Stage 1

Blogging was introduced into a first-year module on the BA (Hons) 3D Design/Crafts course at Staffordshire University for the term starting in January 2011. This first-year module, running in the second term, was called 'Studying 3D Design: Integrating Theory and Practice' and aimed to give students an introduction to research and academic writing skills. The number of students attending in 2011 was twelve, which made this an ideal group to test these ideas as a small-scale pilot project. The different tasks were planned according to Walmsley's model of Blended e-Learning (2011), which divides into phases of active induction, guided exploration, facilitated investigation and self-organised learning, with particular care being paid to the first two phases.

The active induction to the blogging component was conceived as a guided introduction in a computer lab in weekly sessions of an hour (on top of the 'normal' tuition on this module), and structured written tasks were set to be done in students' independent study time. The specific objective was to introduce students to the habit of documenting their research and give them space to practice (and give feedback on each other's) writing in preparation for an academic essay, which was the main graded component. Students were asked to keep the blog private, but invite their peers and tutors, so that work could be shared in a supportive environment. The blog itself was formatively assessed.

Blogging was introduced to students through an active induction. As a preparatory task for the first session, students were asked to find examples of practitioners' blogs in their respective areas, before a how-to lecture on starting a blog. This they could then immediately put into practice by starting and personalising their own blogs in a computer lab with guidance by the tutor.

Technical instructions (e.g. the tutor did a step-by-step demonstration of how to up-load an image) and discussions in class initially introduced blogging tasks each week, with students being required to consider/answer issues that had been raised in the session. This support was phased out later, when students were just given questions to answer on the blog by the instructor, with no in-class discussion in preparation for the tasks. Learning activities in the phase of guided exploration included introductory descriptive tasks such as blogging about their experiences of primary research during a study trip to a museum; preparing a 'brainstorm' of their essay topic as a hardcopy in their sketchbooks and then scanning and posting it on their blogs; commenting on each others' ideas for the essay and using the comments they received to identify keywords relating to a clearer direction for their research; using these keywords to start their literature search and post thoughts about sources, compiling an annotated bibliography; introducing categories and tags in order to organise their posts, starting with organising the research sources they had found into sections and writing a post on each to get a literature review started; putting sections together into an essay draft, before a session on formal language and academic conventions and some time to revise their drafts in order to conform to academic standards for their final essay.

Findings and discussion of Stage 1

Initially the up-take of the blog seemed positive. Setting aside dedicated time in a computer lab meant that the students that needed it had the opportunity to ask for help and thus develop confidence to post, attach images and personalise their blogs. While some students of the group were reluctant to engage with the technology, after their own survey of how practitioners they admired were using blogs at the very beginning, they seemed enthusiastic to learn about how to do something like this themselves.

Students had no problems with the introductory descriptive tasks connected to the study trip. Their accounts of the museum visit and their own research activity during this time were thoughtful and

most of them seemed to quickly find their own voice and style. Some even posted an account of another study trip they went on as part of a different module. However, while students were happy to comment on their peers' blogs when prompted, these comments never went beyond brief 'I really like the theme you selected'-type comments. There was no real engagement with the research content that the others had posted. Once the course work began to shift towards the preparation of assessed work, the blogging activity ceased, even though weekly tasks were still set.

In the module feedback¹, which was returned by eight of the students, it became clear that they chose not to engage with the blog because it was not marked. While three of them identified the blog as one of the 'most useful aspects of the module' (a standard module monitoring question), three stated under 'aspects of the module that could be improved' (another standard question) that they felt keeping the blog was too technical and that there was too much time spent on the blogs, considering this aspect of the module was not marked.

When asked what the students thought about the blog, the answers ranged from useful to not useful, with some saying that they liked looking at blogs for their research but were not interested in the keeping of one. Two students stated that they preferred working on paper. Seven stated that they would have engaged with the blog more if it had been a marked component, but one remarked that the blog was too personal to be graded. Five students thought that the blog helped them practice their writing against one who said it did not, while one said that the blog had not been used enough to be useful. One particularly identified the blogs' uses as useful in documenting and reporting activities.

Most of the students thought that a regularly kept blog had the potential to help their research and writing, although they all particularly referred to its usefulness in keeping track of and documenting their research, whether visual or text-based. However, two of them made comments that they thought the blog was repeating work. One stated: 'I document a lot in sketchbooks so the blog became a hindrance but I'll definitely keep going...' (3D), while the other said: '[...] I feel it's repeating workload already previously achieved, but you can look to other colleagues to see their achievements.' (3D)

Asked whether they thought the regular keeping of a blog had the potential to help their practical work, one said: 'No, because I am a practical person and don't want to', and another one stated: 'Not really. I use my sketchbooks to write + keep a journal thing too, there's only so many words I can use daily' (3D). Four others identified the blog's potential to track the progress of one's own ideas and two said that it was useful to allow others to see your work.

These comments show that there was some resistance to the use of technology, although it was not as pronounced as had been expected. Indeed, through other channels rather than the module monitoring, students fed back that they thought the session in the computer lab felt 'tacked on' and unnecessary. When it came to the writing itself, there was a clear sense that while the students did see the potential of writing, it was not enough to do it regularly as they were not summatively marked on this component. It also showed that they thought more about the writing as documenting rather than as exploratory pieces to develop and organise their thinking in preparation for the essay or their practical work. It was clear that they had not understood the concept of thinking through writing or using writing to work towards a stage of abstract conceptualisation.

Pilot project – Stage 2

Taking the evaluation from the first stage on board, it was decided to continue to introduce blogging to first year students in modules similar to 'Studying 3D Design', albeit in a slightly amended format. For the first term of the 2011/12 academic year, blogging tasks were introduced to both 'Researching for Fine Art' (32 students) and 'Researching for Animation and VFX' (48 students). This time, there was no dedicated regular slot in a computer lab; instead, there were brief how-to demonstrations included within the normal weekly session (in a seminar room), and tasks were set and discussed in this arena

¹ The module feedback was collected through an anonymous questionnaire. Quotations have been slightly adjusted for spelling, with abbreviations indicating the award group the student was from: 3D for 3D Design/Crafts, FA for Fine Art and A&VFX for Animation and VFX

as well. Another change that was made was that the blogging was now not just formative, but summatively marked at 25% (with another 25% for a presentation and 50% for an illustrated essay). The type of tasks were similar to Stage 1, although they varied slightly, with the Fine Art cohort not using the introductory task of finding and posting about three practitioners' blogs but rather starting to blog about their study trip, because that took place at the very beginning of the term. Animation and VFX did not go on an organised study trip, but had an independent study week during a short film festival later in the term that they were encouraged to attend (and blog about). More emphasis was made in the introductory session about how the tasks were preparation for the final essay. It was expected that through the change in assessment status, blogging would be taken up more, and in extension would be seen by the students as more useful. It was also expected that the Animation and VFX students would be more enthusiastic about keeping a blog than the Fine Art students, as they were thought to be more 'computer savvy'.

Findings and discussion of Stage 2

As was expected, participation in the blogging tasks was much better after the external motivation of a mark was introduced. With the progression of the term, some of the posts moved away from the merely descriptive and became more analytical, as the tasks had been designed. The assessment status of the activities meant that students continued to engage with the tasks, which participants had failed to do towards the end of Stage 1. Near the end of the term, individual students started to comment on their peers' work with sometimes in-depth and thoughtful comments. This was more evident in Animation and VFX than in Fine Art, but otherwise there seemed to be no difference in the take up of the technology. On all three courses, there were students who started using their blogs well beyond the scope of this particular module – some to post their work and inspirations for other modules. Most of these students were beginning to find their professional voice. There were only a few who used it 'confessionally'², to vent about the course, for example.

In the module feedback (Animation and VFX students returned 31 out of 48 questionnaires, Fine Art students returned 25 out of 32), 16 of the Animation and VFX (A&VFX) students and 8 of the Fine Art (FA) students mentioned the blog as one of the three best aspects of the module, one of them stating 'The blog – it kept me going as I was willing to show the research I discovered and what ideas I wished to demonstrate' (FA). Clearer blogging tasks were identified by both award groups as an area for improvement (2 FA and 4 A&VFX).

When asked what they thought about their experience of blogging, the FA students made very positive responses, ranging from 'very useful' and 'great idea' to 'ok'. Four of them mentioned initial difficulty with the technology, but all in the context of having tackled it, for example, 'Took a while to understand how to keep a blog – not great with technology. I enjoy it now though' (FA). The students identified the blog as a tool to express opinions, use a 'comfortable' writing style (as opposed to the formal writing of the essay), keep track of their own and each other's work and progress, useful in forming ideas and as a relevant 'contemporary thing' to tackle.

The A&VFX students were the most part positive, with some enthusiastically appreciating it:

I have really enjoyed keeping a blog, I find it to be a great motivational tool as well as an effective way to catalogue my work and process/thoughts. I look forward to seeing how I progress throughout the pages. (A&VFX)

Only two students seemed to have a problem with the blog, one remarking: 'Shouldn't be mandatory. Don't believe everybody wants to showcase their work this way' (A&VFX), while another stated: 'It's fine but it feels pointless because its private' (A&VFX).

As the technical introduction to the blog was not taking place in a computer lab anymore, a question also addressed whether the students felt that more help was needed with the technical side of

² Using their blogs in this way was not inappropriate in the context of the module, and criticism of the module and course itself was not taken into consideration in the assessment.

blogging. While for the A&VFX students the set up seemed to be no problem, seven FA students wanted more help with this. There were also some people on both modules who asked for the tasks to be made clearer. A&VFX students made a number of comments regarding 'advanced' use of the blog, i.e. how to follow people or how to change the layout. A few students also stated that they would have preferred if both the lecturer and other students had left more comments to their posts through the comment function on their blogs.

Three FA and eleven A&VFX students stated that the blogging did not help practice their writing. The other respondents listed some interesting reasons why it was helpful, ranging from 'It was more helpful for research because tasks made us to do it regularly' (FA) to 'it helps get ideas together before drafting' (A&VFX). A number of students on both modules commented on the difference in language used in a personal blog as opposed to a formal essay, with some understanding that they were 'allowed' to use a different type of language in their blogs ('I like how it's not big long wordy entries needed, I like how it's a running commentary on your work, so yes, and you can go back and add things to previous entries.' (FA)), one stating that it was a disadvantage that blogging had encouraged the habit of writing 'more casually' (A&VFX), and one student stating that blogging did not practice writing because 'the essay and the blog used different styles of writing' (A&VFX).

When asked whether keeping a regular blog had the potential to help their research and writing, all 25 FA students who answered this question thought it had potential, although one of them stated 'research yes, writing not' (FA), while four A&VFX students felt that it could not, with one stating: 'Probably not as the two seem unrelated' (A&VFX). The reasons the students gave for this potential included documenting research work, the need to continuously update it, keeping them focused and getting feedback on writing in progress. There were some that directly stated that the blog had helped them write their essay, with one saying 'prior I didn't usually write at all' (A&VFX). Again there were some students on both modules that referred to the difference between formal and colloquial writing.

Students from both module groups mostly agreed that a regularly kept blog had the potential to help their practical work, with only two objecting by commenting: 'No, practice work more based on experimentation' (FA) and 'No, because it is only written aspect and not an influence on my studio based work.' (FA) The others listed a number of potential uses for the blogs, which included sharing practice and receiving feedback, archiving and documenting progress in written and pictorial form and noting ideas for future work.

Discussion

Looking at the two stages of this small-scale pilot project in progression, it is evident that the introduction of the mark for the blogs made a significant difference. This change meant that more students became engaged with not just the posting, but also the exploratory writing that helped focus their ideas. As can be seen from the module feedback of the students involved in Stage 2, a more rounded view of the potential that the blogging had to offer them, with respect to their research, writing and practice, developed with this engagement, a view that in some cases went well beyond the simple documenting and archiving of material.

From the students' point of view, there seemed to be two main and one smaller weakness in this component of the module: they wanted the tasks to be clearer, possibly with examples, they wanted more interaction, and some of them wanted more instruction in the how-to of using the blogsite. Some of this is easy to address: posting examples with the tasks on a dedicated area of the Virtual Learning Environment in future will make it easier for the students to find the tasks, as opposed to them having to go through the material of the week when the task was set, and give them an idea of the type of things they could post. Posting examples could also include an extra aside on why they were asked to post/think about the specific task, which could help them form an idea of where the blogging fits into their overall research and practice. The examples could also include links to the Help feature provided by the blogsite, allowing the students to find out about their how-to needs if necessary.

Providing more interaction is a more difficult task. With this being a private blog, there are two different types of interaction – peer interaction and student interaction with the tutor(s). While they

were asked to comment on their peers' posts in some of the tasks, that hardly ever happened until the end of the term, these late interactions possibly being motivated by the mentioning that their comments would be included in the blog mark. The requirement to post comments could be flagged up more in earlier tasks. It might also be useful here to introduce group work. Some of their failure to post comments might have been down to the fact that there was too much to follow, if they wanted to follow the whole class. If they were divided into groups of about five students, it might feel more manageable for them to monitor what the rest of their group was doing. Interaction with the tutor unfortunately runs into a similar problem. Regularly monitoring 80 students' blogs takes a lot of time, and while there was the occasional comment posted by the tutor, this could not be regular or give attention to each individual student. However, if the students developed a community of practice through small groups, then regular comments addressing the progress in the groups by the tutor might be realistic.

This difficulty in monitoring 80 students' work ties into the issue of extra work for the tutor. With the blogs being summatively assessed, there is now the need to take time to mark them. This took much longer than expected and needs to be taken into consideration when planning the workload of the teachers. It is believed, however, that this extra time is well worth spending as the students who became engaged with the tasks did a lot of thinking through writing, which was reflected in the quality of their final essay, which could be seen when comparing their initial ideas and drafts posted on the blog with their submitted essays.

Overall, the use of the blog with its opportunity to include images, film and hyperlinks as well as words, seemed to be well-placed in the Art and Design studio-based practices. While it is a way to engage with work that might be much less tactile than what students do in the studio, it is this removing them a step from the immediacy of their practice, their reflection-in-action, that makes this exploratory writing so valuable. Beginning the module with a survey of professional blogs by practitioners the students admire is also a good way of emphasising that blogging is the building of a professional skill. However, in the longer term (i.e. over the following years when the blogs might become public), real care needs to be taken to make it clear to students that this blog should develop their professional voice, and that they need to carefully consider what information they want to share with a larger audience – that could potentially hire or commission them.

Conclusion

While this research has been carried out on a small scale, some valuable indicative conclusions can be reached: As Stage 1 has shown, students are quick to dismiss tools when they do not see the immediate link to their practice, such as transferable skills in general. As it is important to build technology awareness in students and to give students the option to use blogging strategies in their professional practice, this lack of motivation needs to be addressed in any planned course that aims to utilise blogs. A regular engagement of students with the blog possibly could be achieved through the introduction of incentives such as a low percentage of the overall grade. These incentives will also more fully engage students who feel uncomfortable with technology in this strategy and allow them to develop skills that they can later choose to use in their practice.

The marked change that came with grading the blog summatively in Stage 2 showed an engagement that allowed the students to explore writing as part of an exploratory thinking process that was not necessarily writing centred and that they did not seem to see as predominantly academic simply because they were able to use informal language as well as include images, videos and hyperlinks.

Although this research was conducted on a small scale, it indicates that the keeping of blogs can be a useful skill for students wanting to become studio-based Art and Design practitioners. Because a computer interface does not have the tactile nature of a real sketchbook, direct mark-making (using an implement, whether it be pencil, paint, sewing machine or collage techniques, to name a few, to make direct marks as expressions and developments of ideas) becomes much more constrained. This is why blogging needs to be presented as the extension of the more tactile 'off-loading' devices of the sketchbook or reflective journal, rather than a replacement. Students also need to have it explained that the 'step away' from the immediacy of their work, through logging onto the computer or going to a dedicated software, if they are working digitally, is what is beneficial when it comes to

getting into a reflective mode to reflect-on- rather than -in-action. The change of medium also addresses a potential problem of using the sketchbook/reflective journal as a development aid in the sense of an 'off-loading' device, particularly if those two functions are combined: it is easy to turn the blogs into purely descriptive tools and thus miss the stage of abstract conceptualisation that Kolb identified in the Experiential Learning Cycle (1984). This missing of the stage of abstract conceptualisation particularly can be the case if these artefacts remain private, i.e. are not discussed with tutors in an initial stage of developing practice as a student. The step away from the sketchbook is particularly important as it often moves thoughts from a visual/ideas phase into an externalised words format that is the first step to reflecting on progress, to transform it from tacit to explicit knowledge, thinking through writing.

While through the use of the blog notation loses the tactile qualities of a workbook, the opportunity to add not only images, but also audio and video files and to organise content through comments, tags and hyperlinks should not be discounted. Most crucially, the provision of a space that is virtually removed from the studio and thereby facilitates reflection-on-action, which could be seen as an academic writing skill, should not be discounted.

This study indicates that the blog has the potential to be a very useful tool for the student of the studio-based disciplines in particular, as it can provide the link between the studio and the academic practice. Through a progression of tasks ranging from descriptive to analytic, from specific to contextual, short posts have the potential to develop and organise the thinking to support the research and composition of an academic piece of writing – with starting points rooted in students' own experience.

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