Digital Naivety and the displaced studio

Abstract:

This paper considers the complexities of online studio art teaching in the COVID-present, specifically in relation to the 'digital naivety' of 'Digital Native' students. The rapid shift to online-learning at the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis was accompanied by suggestions that so-called 'digital natives' would be well-positioned to readily adapt. Instead, teaching studio art online laid bare the shortcomings of this out-moded moniker, and the ever-urgent need for newly responsive ways of considering studio teaching practice.

Stemming from a present-first-hand experience of online and face-to-face visual art studio teaching, this paper describes observations made of learning experiences during the COVID crisis. Despite their digital native status, mid-degree visual art students being taught online struggled to identify and creatively act upon from their autodidactically-privileged position. Instead, they remained adrift in an online-ocean of unexplored experiential, creative, and critical possibilities – digital naifs struggling to turn their digitally-centric lives to the pursuit of artmaking at all. This paper considers these observations in relation to self-determination theory and argues for the need to rethink how students are supported in their growth toward self-determined, critical digital nomadism. While 'the studio' can be a potent pedagogical place, its displaced status in the COVID-present demands a radical revision both online and 'off'.

Digital Naivety and the displaced studio

This paper reflects on some of the complexities encountered in teaching visual art practice online during COVID-lockdown in the first half of 2020. Specifically, it considers how this experience made clear the 'digital naivety' of 'Digital Native' students (Prensky, 2000), and exposed the need for new approaches to studio teaching. These reflections are drawn from my own present-first-hand experience of both online and face-to-face visual art studio teaching – observing what is currently unfolding in student art studios, and connecting this to some existing theories. As with many stories of 2020, there is no clear or happy ending here, these are preliminary observations. In essence the COVID-displaced studio experience demonstrated that as educators, we face an ever-increasing challenge in helping the current generation of art students to critically engage with their digital creative lives.

The Bachelor of Fine Arts (Visual Arts) at Queensland University of Technology (QUT) centres around six 'Open Studio' units, one per each semester of the degree. The 'open' model of these units takes an a-disciplinary approach to the use of medium, is heuristically focussed, and foregrounds the conceptually driven nature of much of contemporary art practice. While related to numerous 'choice-based' (Douglas and Jaquith, 2009), and 'experiential' (Fry and Kolb, 1979) theories of pedagogy, it primarily operates in the tradition of the *Post-Studio* classes at CalArts taught by artists including John Baldessari and Michael Asher. In QUT's Open Studio (which I will also call 'art school'), students are tasked with making artwork, researching other artists and theories, and reflecting on both these activities to generate a cyclical and symbiotic process of practice. This is further supported by an ongoing regimen of in-class peer critique and individual consultations with teaching staff, and ultimately empowers students to develop their own contemporary art practice.

A crucial aspect of the Open Studio is that while students are free to choose any medium from one artwork to the next, working with digital media (digital images, photography, video, online etc) is also made a central part of this creative development. Students working in analogue media are also encouraged to translate their work into digital forms to explore other formal and conceptual possibilities. Not only is this because any emerging artist's practice unavoidably operates in relation to the digital (internet) space (in context, and often form and concept), this digital-centrism also challenges outmoded and detrimentally romanticised ideas of the 'studio' that students often arrive with, including from their secondary school experience. Writer

and curator Caitlin Jones articulated the critical importance of this centrism as the 'laptop studio', identifying that:

> "[t]raditional 'open studio' conventions are rendered obsolete as, by its very nature, the laptop studio can always be 'open'. The 'post studio' laptop studio also significantly disrupts the temporal process of the traditional studio—moments of research, production and dissemination are continually evolving and reorganizing" (2010).

By encouraging the laptop-studio, not only is the Open Studio approach responsive to students' digital lives, but this digital-centrism can activate and spur on the development of their practices in conceptually reflective and contextually reflexive ways. However, this approach does come with myriad challenges, even before COVID. Key among these has been that counter to 'digital native' rhetoric (Prensky, 2000), art school students range anywhere from reticent, to suspicious, to even outwardly hostile toward the use of digital technologies in their art-making. As many studio art teachers would attest, strains of 'I don't really like the computer' or 'Computers hate me!' are common-place from art students – baffling sentiment from a predominantly Gen-Z cohort whose lives are otherwise considered steeped in internet and digital culture. During COVID-lockdown, this attitude became more pronounced and the problems it poses for studio art practice teaching were only made clearer.

Plainly, my observation is that students are arriving at university ill-equipped to critically engage with their digital and online-centric lives. While some primary and secondary classrooms make significant use of digital tools, this seems to be doing little to prepare students to consider or articulate the creative, let alone psychosocial impacts of digital technologies. This is especially apparent in Open Studio critiques and consultations, where the use of medium is constantly interrogated for its requisite conceptual implications. This is also the very kind of critical thinking arguably most crucial for any creative professional in the 21st century. While this expectation may be setting too high a bar (perhaps this kind of thinking only emerges at a tertiary level), my observation is that art students often seem unwilling to meaningfully engage in even formal experimentation with digital mediums – the key way through which artists can develop conceptual awareness and critical thinking. In essence, instead of digital natives, students appear to be digital naifs – communicating and engaging constantly with the digital as users, but without creatively exploring it as artists to conceptually understand and critically interrogate the medium. Here I think of novelist David Foster Wallace's

story about the fish so surrounded by water that it doesn't even know what water is (2009).

I see evidence of this digital naivety every time visual art students fail to even conceive of using commonplace digital technologies for artmaking (from the internet, to Photoshop, to their own phones) let alone understand that this could communicate critical thinking. This was made clear during COVID-lockdown, when students necessarily relied on digital technology as the conduit for all of their artmaking. The often-insurmountable difficulty students expressed and demonstrated through the lack of breadth and depth of their practices during this time made their digital naivety clearer than ever, and evidenced the need to re-consider how we address the laptop-studio. Not only did the entire cohort often struggle to create artwork because they reported 'feeling limited by having to work digitally', the majority of students also 'couldn't find information' about artists and ideas (for reasons including not revising their search terms, and forgetting Google Scholar exists, let alone scholarly databases). In one example that seems emblematic, a student used coloured cellophane over their phone camera lens because their in-built camera app 'wouldn't let them' add a tint to their self-portrait. Even though this example initially seemed like creative problem solving, like many cases, it quickly became a creative or even conceptual dead-end. Students often reported being stymied by (perceived) technological limitations later revealed to be a lack of curiosity in skill development or motivation to explore and experiment. A pervasive attitude of 'I didn't know how, so I just didn't' demonstrated a deficit of critical direction or even the absence of a learned instinct to identify creative opportunities. While much of this could be excused by the 'unprecedented times' of lockdown, all these observations were actually made pre-COVID-lockdown, and were only repeated and amplified once the shift had been made to online-only contact.

Before continuing, I want to address two important contexts that inform these observations. Firstly, I spend most of my time teaching second-year studio students. This transitional year is traditionally a challenging one for students at QUT, so these observations should be considered against the backdrop of students contending with their own proclivities of artmaking and the social value of art more broadly. The second context is that there is a significant amount of poor mental-health plaguing university students, and certainly no less in creative arts cohorts. Investigation into this appears surprisingly under-researched, but is ongoing (see for example, the 2017 study from Orygen, The National Centre of Excellence in Youth Mental Health). Suffice to say, poor mental health among tertiary students appears to be on the increase, from already

very concerning levels. While the rapid shift to online-learning in March was accompanied by some suggestions that these 'digital natives' would at least be relatively well-positioned to adapt, instead arguably, these mental health challenges created a perfect storm of de-motivation for students, which in turn made their digital naivety much clearer.

While these observations may present as my dim view of the cohort, this is not the case, and I certainly do not want to diminish their promise, only to identify areas of teaching that require rethinking. Indeed, almost invariably, these students are highly socially conscious and instinctively sensitive artists, with strong hopes for their creative practices to seek and communicate relevance and empathetic connection to the broader community and the world. In service of such worthy hopes and goals, and avoiding any simple pretext of generational difference, I am considering this problem of digital naivety as one of extrinsic and intrinsic motivation in relation to the work of psychologists Edward Deci and Richard Ryan and their self-determination theory (SDT) (2000). This is a dense area of discourse and I make no claims to expertise or even exacting fidelity. Instead, in the same fashion as I instruct students to, I am adopting these ideas as a flaneur might (de Certeau, 1989). I am considering SDT as a prompt for exploration, to consider this current position, and to provide a potential bearing for how and where to move next.

The value in SDT is firstly in identifying that, despite actively choosing to attend art school, most second-year students are probably only some of the way along Deci and Ryan's continuum of motivation (See Figure 1), yet to move completely from extrinsic externally regulated motivation; but hopefully moving toward intrinsic internally regulated motivation more rapidly in the final year of their degree.
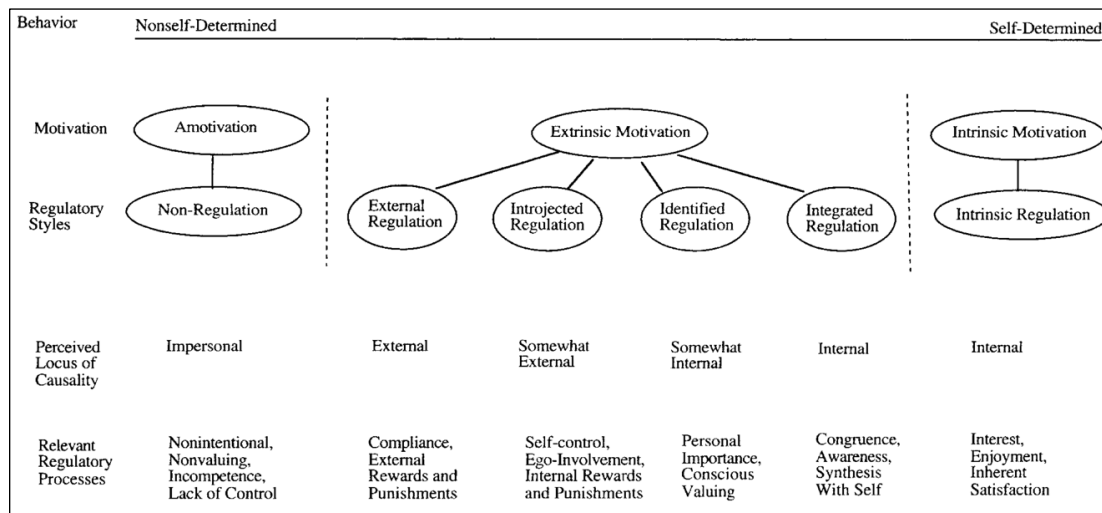
Figure 1: The Self-Determination Continuum showing types of motivation with their regulatory styles, loci of causality, and corresponding processes.
From: Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000). Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being. *American Psychologist*, *55*(1), 68–78. https://doi-org.ezp01.library.qut.edu.au/10.1037/0003-066X.55.1.68

Certainly, many students approach studio practice assessment as something they 'have' to do ('compliance') or at best 'should' do ('internal reward'), rather than a place to relish in creative development (an intrinsically regulated motivation driven by inherent interest). So, Deci and Ryan's SDT suggests that limitations to students' progress – their digital naivety – is due to a lack in any or all of three main concerns: perceived competence of skills, a sense of connection with peers, and/or autonomous position in learning. As one might expect, on-the-ground in the studios, it has long appeared to be a mix of all three, and once students were displaced from those studios in COVID-lockdown, this was made even more apparent. Ultimately, when it comes to critically digitally-informed art practice, art students have a crisis of self-determination that threatens to undermine the outcomes that the Open Studio program aims for.

Though COVID-lockdown exposed how lacking art students were in their sense of competence, connection, and autonomy, for the sake of length, I'll leave aside here the question of peer connection. This was obviously lacking during lockdown, and is usually remedied by building a culture of supportive peer feedback through consistent studio class attendance (an undertaking worthy of a whole other discussion interconnected to this one). It is interesting though to note that (perhaps like many of us), digital naifs often reported their failure to proactively use the technology they had

available to alleviate the isolation of lockdown. More pedagogically pressing however, are the arguably connected factors of skill competence and learning autonomy. In the contact-time-poor tertiary context, there is only ever time to introduce students to digital software such as Adobe Photoshop or Illustrator (let alone anything more complex), with the requirement for students to then continue this learning outside of class. But here students seem caught in a catch-22 situation – recognising their lack of ability, but curiously and perhaps causatively, unmotivated to take ownership of this skill development. This 'I didn't know how, so I just didn't' attitude seems the crux of a problem with significant flow-on effects for their development as artists – if they don't have the skills to experiment, they can't effectively explore, or even conceive of how to explore, the creative possibilities of contemporary image-making. They certainly then miss the opportunity to grapple with any of the larger conceptual concerns these creative explorations might evidence or express. This effectively reinforces a cycle – their inability to start, or make something 'look good', stymies their motivation to further learn software, and develop their practice both formally and conceptually through new artmaking.

Compounding this catch-22 problem is the fact that students instead turn to mobile apps for 'easy-fixes' in their artmaking, which has the effect of preventing them from identifying any number of other formal opportunities for their work along the way. While apps can offer powerful aesthetic shortcuts, they are often formally 'narrow'; made as single-purpose tools for consumers who don't want or need to consider broader formal possibilities or conceptual implications. For example, while the power of a video 'face-replace' mobile app is indeed remarkable in comparison to software of only a few years ago, its ease of use means that a student doesn't have to consider the deeper socio-political implications of facial recognition technology that manually manipulated face-tracking software makes clearer. As with the Wizard of Oz, developers of mobile apps don't want users seeing 'behind the curtain' lest it spoil the illusory magic, but artists seeking to critically engage with the world need to at least consider that the curtain exists. As a more prosaic example, consider the student mentioned earlier; turning to a cellophane/analogue solution because of perceived app limitations meant they were then similarly formally limited to the readily available colours of cellophane, so obviously Photoshop (or a similarly useful program) would have been an immense help for creative development. Such software-based experimentation could have ultimately expanded the number of formal and conceptual avenues the work could explore.

In lockdown, the impracticalities of live, remote, large-cohort software demonstration ruled out the usual software instruction for the Open Studio, and instead students were tasked with using asynchronous software tutorials to encourage their own software-based experimentation. However, time and again, with both still image and video editing, students self-identified as skill-deficient, and this in turn became self-limiting. Even during lockdown, when QUT made, along with an abundance of online tutorials, the entire Adobe Creative Cloud suite available for off-campus/at-home access, students failed to take creative advantage. Reporting themselves as incompetent made them reticent to dig any deeper and develop new skills that would improve this situation. This is why SDT seems an appropriate explanation – a perceived lack of skill leads to a lack of learning autonomy, which leads to an ongoing dependence on external motivations for learning development (and so on). Quite the vicious cycle.

Obviously, some of these observations are generalisations, but they certainly cannot be entirely dismissed as an understandable reaction to an 'unprecedented' global pandemic because these symptoms of digital naivety were clearly present pre-COVID. I do acknowledge I am reductively describing a homogenous group, when obviously some individual students did demonstrate autonomous skill development and curious investigation, to some good outcomes for their practice. However, what I am describing here has been a clear trend across multiple years of student cohorts, and which lockdown simply made easier to observe. In moving online, in seeing and hearing students repeat with even greater frequency, the mistakes, missed opportunities, and complaints about digital art-making and thinking, it became clear there is something missing in how digital naifs engage with technology. These observations are what I suggest presents as an important challenge for educators to unpack. I also acknowledge the problem could be especially pronounced in the transitional second year experience, which previously has been at least somewhat addressed by students' successful completion of the year's curriculum. However, my concern is that COVID-lockdown exacerbated this digital naivety, while at the same time, coming along so quickly so as to prevent us as educators from carefully challenging this naivety with new approaches to teaching.

What I am arguing is needed is a new and compelling way to communicate, demonstrate, and habituate the central importance for artists to engage with digital technologies in ways first formally experimental, and then ultimately conceptually critical. Ideally, the foundations of this would be done at a secondary teaching level, working from a curriculum founded on this shared goal. More realistically (if only

somewhat), we in the tertiary sector need first to reach consensus on the worth of this digitally-centric mode at all, before then tackling what it can look like and why. This (potentially fractious) discussion will also require some frank honesty about the differences between working digitally and thinking digitally. This honesty must cut both ways: acknowledging that any ubiquity in the use of digital tools (from apps to complex software) does not necessarily equate to criticality or conceptual depth, nor vice versa. I think here of art theorist Claire Bishop's astute articulation of this situation:

> "[w]hile many artists use digital technology, how many really confront the question of what it means to think, see, and filter affect through the digital? How many thematize this, or reflect deeply on how we experience, and are altered by, the digitization of our existence?" (2012).

This discussion must really be tackled across creative disciplines if we then hope (as I argue we should) to fold its outcomes through all manner of teaching activities at all foundational level programs. This could change the critical trajectory, not only for students entering into the Open Studio, but creative students more broadly.

However the above discussion may develop, in terms of SDT, students clearly need more assistance to move from extrinsic to intrinsic motivation, and this requires educators to address skill competency, peer connection, and learning autonomy in new ways. One clear solution would be to spend more time demonstrating, habituating, and communicating the value of this autonomous skill-development in a classroom situation. This could be done with more pedagogical transparency, explaining in detail the theory of the approach to the cohort with the ultimate aim of re-centring the conceptually grounded approach to the digital that is necessary for students to critique their (and our) digitally-centric lives. The problem of course, is that in the post-COVID tertiary landscape, where all manner of resources are more constrained than ever, we may have our own catch-22: COVID made clear the problem of digital naivety, but also put the potential solution (more time in the studio) in grave peril. At this point, with so much of the future of tertiary education unclear, it seems very possible that more studio teaching and learning activities will be permanently displaced; forced online in the form of asynchronous modules (and the notoriously-faceless void of the much-hated Zoom room) which essentially create a solo learning space. In SDT terms, this displacement would create a motivational crisis; removing peer connection, and further compounding the vicious competence/autonomy cycle described above. An online, asynchronous, modularised, displaced studio would require students to effectively already be fully

formed autonomous artists. It would require the very high skill levels of digital-literacy and critical-thinking-through-making that the digital naive are yet to develop and which appear increasingly difficult (but necessary) to foster in such a time and resource constrained education environment. Much like the rest of 2020, I wish this discussion had a better conclusion, but at this stage, much is still unclear. What is clear is that we are in more need than ever of new strategies for navigating and making sense of this digital, creative, and precarious future.

References

Bishop, C. (2012). 'Digital Divide'. *Artforum International*. 51(1). https://www.artforum.com/print/201207/digital-divide-contemporary-art-and-new-media-31944

Certeau, M. d. (1989). *The practice of everyday life* (3. ed.). ProQuest Ebook Central https://ebookcentral.proquest.com

Douglas, K. M., & Jaquith, D. B. (2018). *Engaging learners through artmaking: Choice-based art education in the classroom*. ProQuest Ebook Central https://ebookcentral.proquest.com

Fry, Ronald. & Kolb, David. (1979). 'Experiential Learning Theory and Learning Experiences in Liberal Arts Education' (1979). *Service Learning, General*. 109. https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/slceslgen/109

Jones, Caitlin. (2010). 'The Function of the Studio (when the studio is a laptop)'. *ART LIES: A Contemporary Art Quarterly*. https://faa218.files.wordpress.com/2014/08/jones_caitlin.pdf

Orygen, The National Centre of Excellence in Youth Mental Health. (2017) 'Under the radar. The mental health of Australian university students'. Melbourne: Orygen, The National Centre of Excellence in Youth Mental Health, 2017. https://www.orygen.org.au/Policy/Policy-Reports/Under-the-radar/Orygen-Under_the_radar_report

Prensky, Marc. (2001),'Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants Part 1'. *On the Horizon*. 9 (5): 1-6. https://doi.org/10.1108/10748120110424816

Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000). 'Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being'. *American Psychologist*, *55*(1), 68–78. https://doi-org.ezp01.library.qut.edu.au/10.1037/0003-066X.55.1.68

Wallace, D. (2009). *This is water: some thoughts, delivered on a significant occasion, about living a compassionate life* (1st ed.). Little, Brown.