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## **Dissatisfaction From Students Who Experienced The Adaption Of Design Workshops To Online Classes**

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The impacts of COVID-19 and associated restrictions on teaching approaches have resulted in a better understanding of online learning and its effects on students. Snap lockdowns in 2020 and 2021 resulted in sudden changes to multimodal teaching styles and delivery – i.e. blended learning. The obvious practical advantage of online learning is providing students greater flexibility to arrange and schedule their learning. However, for some students, the benefits of flexibility do not compensate for the loss of in-person interaction that on-campus units afford. The analysis of student surveys from 2019 and 2020 for studio-based units showed that student satisfaction decreased and a preference for in-person classes was voiced. The intention of this paper is to share the adaptative experience of addressing challenges of online and blended learning in art and design education. Recovery from this period of physical isolation can be repaired by the return to face-to-face delivery but more thought needs to be given to exploring new educational pedagogies that prepare us better for future pandemics and other breakdowns that may disrupt our teaching systems. These insights could allow for more successful adaption to online learning and help us develop better ways to present studio-style classes in an online context to accommodate students who prefer the flexibility of online learning.

### **Introduction**

Prior to emergency lockdowns, online learning was seen as a dedicated or specialised teaching and learning offered by online agencies (e.g. Open University). Campus-based universities have also started to embrace the concept of online learning, but it has been implemented largely as support to enhance traditional in-class teaching and learning. Online units at university differ in delivery and content to those that are taught face to face. Much of the learning and collaboration is asynchronous. Moore (2007) explains that for many online learners, teacher-to-learner and learner-to-content are sufficient without the need for learner-to-learner interaction. However, this may not be the case for students who have to suddenly

move their studies online, or for content that should be taught in-person but must be adapted to online teaching (Yates et al., 2021).

In 2020, Edith Cowan University (ECU) had two emergency lockdowns. The first transition to online learning occurred in the middle of the first semester and was characterised by rapid adoption and lack of preparedness. The sudden transition to online learning resulted in increased numbers of late withdrawals and fails due to non-submission of assessments. The feedback and observations made by students revealed the problems with adapting teaching styles that encourage collaboration, conceptualising and making physical artefacts to an online context. Comments in the end of semester surveys exposed student dissatisfaction after the unit was moved online.

The data in this paper relates to students who were enrolled in a Bachelor of Design at ECU as on-campus students. The transition to online learning at ECU occurred in Week 4 of the semester, which allowed only a short period of time to prepare online teaching materials. Furthermore, most had very little experience studying online. Data collected after the lockdown periods reflect overall dissatisfaction with the change in content delivery despite the assumption that as digital natives the students would negotiate the change with ease (McMahon & Jung, 2011; Prensky, 2001; Palfrey & Gasser, 2008).

This paper shares the adaptive response to online teaching due to sudden lockdowns. It discusses the challenges of teaching online and blended learning in art and design education. This experience has led to the need for more exploration of new educational pedagogies that prepare us better for future pandemics and other breakdowns that may disrupt our teaching systems.

### **Challenges of Online Teaching and Learning**

Design majors in the Bachelor of Design at ECU deliver units that are largely structured around studio-based learning. Studio-based learning is significantly different to traditional lecture-tutorial formats of many university units in Australia. These workshops encourage learning through making and doing rather than lecture content delivery and individual assessment. Focusing on a “learning-through-doing” (Meyers, 2021) approach, learning activities involve simulated industry projects, rapid prototyping, evaluations, design critiques, and peer reviews. Through these activities students take greater responsibility for their learning and support each other’s

learning through collaboration. Collaboration is a key learning strategy, as well as independently driven design processes, even when working independently. Students share their process for peer review to gain insights from others with different backgrounds and expertise.

In transitioning to online learning, the lack of direct and in-person collaboration with peers and academic staff was the main concern of students and it impacted negatively on their learning. The following concerns shared by students transitioning to online learning were observed by the authors of this paper during the first snap lockdown in 2020:

- lack of engagement;
- reduced interaction with academic staff and peers;
- feelings of detachment and isolation from others;
- reduced motivation;
- access to facilities; and
- IT problems.

Similar findings were shared by a recent study, the *Student Experience of Online Learning Project*, conducted by TEQSA (2020). Fifteen key thematic issues were identified as perceived problems by students. All of the above-mentioned issues were reported, with IT and peer/academic interaction identified as the most critical issues. Student engagement has a direct impact on the academic outcomes of students. Feeling disconnected and disengaged when the physical delivery of the units stopped, students in turn withdrew from units late in the semester, and fails due to non-submission of assessments were higher than usual.

One way of gauging the effects of the sudden change to online learning is to examine data from end-of-semester surveys. A comparative analysis of *Unit and Teaching Evaluation Instrument* (UTEI) surveys conducted by ECU over two years between 2019 and 2020 showed that student satisfaction decreased and a preference for in-person classes was identified. The statistical analysis of the survey shows a decline in student satisfaction in some units (see Table 1). The 2019 survey shows 71% to 100% satisfaction across eight categories of unit experience including: unit organisation, materials, assessments, improvement of general skills, and critical thinking, extension of learning and overall satisfaction.

Unit code	2019	2020
GDI1100 Experience Design	71%	60%
GDI2100 Web Design	78%	71%
GDI3202 Advanced Game Design	100%	50%

Table 1: Results of Unit Teaching Evaluation (UTEI) Instrument surveys

The overall score of the units in 2020 declined especially in GDI3202, which is a highly technical design unit where advanced game development is taught (e.g. asset creation, level design, programming for interactivity). GDI3202 is a unit that has had consistently high UTEI scores. Interestingly, a formative unit experience survey during the early phase of the transition to online learning indicated that students in GDI3202 were satisfied with the performance of the teaching staff, the preparation for online learning and materials provided. However, by the end of the semester when the final UTEI was conducted, the students expressed that online learning was not appropriate for the unit as the studio-based practical components could not be replicated by watching recorded lectures and online workshop activities.

Student A feedback from 2020 UTEI survey

'This is a very hands-on unit and it's been extremely difficult to complete alone, without the support of [on-campus] tutorials and lectures'

Students indicated that watching pre-recorded lectures was not engaging and that over time the lack of live, in-person lectures led to reduced motivation. At first, attendance and enthusiasm for maintaining peer-to-peer and teacher-to-student interaction was high but gradually, fewer students participated in online discussions with peers and teaching staff, which led to poor collaboration amongst students. The lack of successful collaboration was consistently highlighted as a disappointing feature of online learning, as summarised in comments from the UTEI surveys from students:

Student B from the 2020 UTEI survey

'I do not think this unit functioned well as an online unit. ... as I missed a huge amount of the learning experience of making a game while isolated. Game design is all about collaboration and this was impossible from home'

Student C from the 2020 UTEI survey

'Design drawing is something that should've been hands on, but due to uncontrollable circumstances, it was not. I don't hold this against anyone as this is no ones [sic] fault, but I don't feel like I got what I needed from this unit due to being online - nor does my work reflect the teaching I needed'

The negative reaction of students to the online learning experience is most apparent when reading comments such as the ones above. Where the overall satisfaction rates for each unit remained fairly similar to previous years for most units, students voiced their dissatisfaction in the comments, indicating that it was not the unit content or the staff that they saw as the problem but the change to online learning.

Additional barriers to the success of the online learning experience observed by the authors during live virtual classes were internet connectivity and computer hardware problems. Students' access to video conferencing was often interrupted due to a large number of students accessing the university's student portal site simultaneously. Some students were located in remote towns (e.g. Esperance – over 690km away from Perth) with poor internet connections which greatly affected their access to course materials, especially bandwidth heavy activities (e.g. live chat, streaming video, file sharing, cloud applications). A small number of students had old laptops without access to a camera which affected their ability to share their visual progress live for feedback.

### **Addressing the Challenges**

The issues identified in Semester 1 2020 provided opportunity for improvement in the approach used in the following semester when all units transferred to online learning. A major barrier to transition from face-to-face mode of teaching to online learning was insufficient engagement with peers and academic staff. The absence of the campus-based social experience alienated some students, leading to poor academic performances and problems with mental health.

To address the issues related to engagement and social interactions, three main communication and delivery of learning materials strategies were implemented.

#### *Guided learning experience*

Lectures continued to be provided as pre-recorded videos. Pre-recorded lectures were segmented into a series of short videos (under 15 minutes each) in order to

avoid boredom. Copies of lecture notes with detailed and narrative notes were provided to offer low-bandwidth learning resources. Lectures were then followed by self-directed short practical activities to be completed by individual students. Students were given the option of attending a live class where their class activities were discussed. Online discussion boards were heavily used to encourage active feedback loops with peers and lecturers. Weekly reminders were sent to motivate and engage students so that they did not lose the momentum of learning and completing assessments. The key to guided learning processes was to provide clearly articulated steps to completing weekly participation in the units and the learning materials.

#### *Live virtual classes*

One of the issues identified was the lack of social interaction and access to peers and their unit lecturers. In addition to pre-recorded lectures, live virtual classes were scheduled as per on-campus unit timetables and focused on practical aspects of the units, simulating the studio-based learning experience. The virtual classes were structured to include:

- discussion of the lecture topics;
- implementation of lecture topics in practice;
- industry engagement; and
- consultations.

A 15-minute discussion of lecture topics, which students reviewed before attending the virtual class, provided an opportunity for students to validate their understanding of the topics. The discussion was then followed by group work which was encouraged through online forums and breakout rooms. Third party visual tools, such as Mural and SpaceDraft, were utilised to promote engagement and active discussions amongst students and visual articulation of their design processes and prototypes of their work. The constant presence of real lecturers and classroom interaction helped students to recover from the unexpected interruption in their learning. Inviting local and international guest lecturers further motivated students to participate in virtual classes.

#### *Individual consultations*

Interactions with academic staff were broadened beyond one-to-many classroom chats to simulate informal interaction. Multiple live virtual chat rooms, which acted as academic staff offices, were created to organise individual consultations with

students to discuss their projects and their academic performance. A live Google consultation timetable was created to allow students to make an appointment with academic staff. These individual consultations allowed students to express the personal struggles that were affecting their academic performance. This was particularly useful for both staff and students to help negotiate the best approach to the sudden change in learning conditions.

## **Conclusion**

The practical advantage of increased flexibility that came with the shift to online learning as a result of COVID-19 lockdowns was not well received by students enrolled in on-campus units. Many students expressed frustrations associated with the absence of on-campus social interaction with their peers and academic staff. Students had difficulties engaging with the pre-recorded lectures and some had issues with connectivity and computer hardware. The first transition to online learning has taught us that traditional three-hour delivery of units cannot be directly translated into an online classroom environment by fulfilling the delivery of unit materials such as uploading pre-recorded lectures. This places the responsibility of learning solely on students. Classroom social interaction is not merely engagement amongst student peers; it also plays an important role in assisting students to assess their own learning and monitor performance. Especially in an online learning environment, it is important to provide an explicit and guided learning process to support students in their self-directed learning. Students felt alienated by the new system of learning and that they were not actively engaged with their peers and the lectures. Providing a constant reminder of the “presence” of support was an important aspect of improving the online learning experience after the negative feedback from the first lockdown. We delivered this through live virtual classes and online collaborative software that simulated group work, and we provided online consultations to try to match what students value in a face-to-face context. The importance of social interaction in student learning is not new and the COVID-19 lockdowns further intensified the impact of isolated learning. The key to successful transition from on-campus learning to blended learning is to understand the characteristics of online resources and platforms and appropriately map the teaching and learning experiences with a variety of approaches to retain student engagement.

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