

See What I'm Saying?

Introduction

This research project examined the introduction of digital media into the academic practice of visual research in order to observe, reflect on and articulate the process of object creation and the placing of objects in collections. By proposing collaboration between level 2 undergraduate students at the University of Brighton, who are studying either 3D Design/WMCP or the History of Design and Decorative Arts and Visual Culture, the planned outcome of this project was an archive of short moving image research.

The two groups of level 2 students had already developed a distinct approach to the made object and they brought with them a good level of expertise in using portable recording technology. By combining these elements, through a managed teaching and learning environment, the intention was to enable students to develop a fresh way of examining objects, both visually and through language. An emphasis was also placed on articulating the design and making process by integrating language with Visual Research through film.

We had observed that students were quite fixed in their identities as either designer/makers or academic writers. This in itself can be seen as a good thing, where students are taking ownership of their subject in order to fully understand the skills necessary to become successful. What could the subjects offer each other in terms of learning and teaching? By linking staff and students together, we considered the possibility of creating a forum for peer group learning where all parties would be acquiring and sharing new skills. At the start, the practice of designing and making an object that has the potential of ending up in a museum collection was actually being seen from two extreme viewpoints. Would it be possible to intervene in the way each group saw its position so that a written discourse could reflect its visual counterpart and vice-versa? Were there opportunities for exploring technology based interactive learning? Could we find a way of creating critical discussion in conjunction with visual research that could form the beginnings of an on-line archive of student research in order to encourage further collaboration and examples of process?

We started by exploring ways of creating a cross disciplinary dialogue which would give the students on all four courses an opportunity to experience each others' subject utilizing a reflective practice approach (Brockbank&McGill (1998) Cowan (1998)). The project was open to students from the respective courses as an option, which would run for twelve weeks during the autumn term and have a credit rated value. The learning outcomes were carefully considered for all students regardless of their subject. We were seeking to include outcomes that would develop the students' ability to

criticize, examine, analyse and evaluate, (higher level verbs as proposed by Biggs (2003). It was also important that we looked at including a teaching strategy that introduced the collaborating students to a new way of seeing their subject within a reflective context. These are all seen as prerequisites to the self-directed unit of study in level three on all courses. It was also felt important that we introduced a common platform for the students to work from and should include a formative assessment that would allow both the development of student learning and an opportunity to monitor how the group was reacting to the project (George & Cowan (1999).

The Project

The project was open to ten students from the Visual Culture and Design History B.A courses and ten students from the 3D Design and WMCP B.A. courses.

We decided to pair the students as soon as they attended the first session as the best way of introducing the collaborative nature of the project., which was intended to be explored and supported through e-learning, wikki site construction as well as specialist workshops and lectures, many of which were video recorded.

The proposal originally required the students to use current technologies that undergraduate students personally own, carry and use on a daily basis, (mobile phones, slim cameras) and re-focus these technologies into the academic practice of visual research in order to examine, reflect on and articulate the process of object creation and collection. We arranged two visits to the V&A Museum, London where it was hoped that the students would gain an insight into the physical care, display considerations and commissioning policy of important object based collections. Initially, the mixed groups of students worked on a series of digital film pieces lasting 20 seconds without sound. As the project developed, this was extended to two pieces of digital film, one minute in length and included sound and/or spoken word, as a final submitted piece. In drawing up the timetable, (Appendix 1) we established a series of weekly themes that the students used to produce the required piece of film. This was brought to the next session with a 200 word written reflection on the experience of filming objects. We would then lead a discussion on how they were making connections between the written and visual parts.

The themes were chosen to give the students a starting point for discussion and to form the basis of a portfolio of digital films and reflective written dialogue, which would build up sequentially to provide a coherent connection between visual and written work.

(Appendix 2)

As the project required the pairs of students to acquire technical skills early on, we formulated an initial questionnaire;

- The first question asked the students about their personal IT Technical Experience; Only two students were confident using digital film editing software.

All students had experience of using a digital video camera.

All students had experience of using an Apple Mac computer using OSX although not every one felt it was their first choice.

- The second question asked about ownership of equipment;

Only 1 student carried a mobile phone that could record moving images.

12 students had their own computer, 9 of which were P.C.s

On the basis of this information we made video cameras available to students who requested them and arranged a computer software film editing induction for the first session.

- The next part of the questionnaire was specifically focused on their use and understanding of what a blog site was. (Appendix 3)

All the students had heard the term blog site and understood how they worked; 85% had their own personal site and 95% had left messages on other people's blog sites. No students were using Student Central on regular basis although all the students had been shown the site in their first year and had a personal password.

Although 85% of the students knew the university offered a blog site, not one single student had used it or could name the site. Asked to name a commercial blog site, eleven different sites were named.

- When asked how they thought a blog site could assist study and research at university, the two most common answers were;

'Helps share knowledge of things going on at college, course events.- etc.'

'A good way to talk to other students for advice and support.'

26% recognized the potential for critical feedback and discussion with their peer group and only one student saw it as an opportunity to seek dialogue with tutors;

'-contacts for teachers or other professionals for advice.'

- Asked if they thought the blog site offered a positive or negative influence on study at university, the feedback fell into distinct categories;

- it could become distracting from the main study.
- it could offer misleading information.
- it would keep students informed about course activity
- it facilitated communication and networking between students.

It was interesting to note that all students saw the university blog site as being a restricted community, which they felt was a positive thing. There was a general feeling that it could offer a useful learning facility but as it was not part of an assessable outcome, the time needed to maintain the blog may be better spent elsewhere, especially if the take up of students was low.

The structure of each session followed a similar pattern every week;

Review and discussion of student's work. (Critical feedback and analysis by staff and students.)

Lecture or Talk by tutor or guest speaker based on next week's theme.

Set next week's theme. (See appendix 2)

Technical workshop.

These weekly sessions were held on a Friday afternoon during the autumn term and the level of attendance was exceptionally good throughout the whole project period.

First Evaluation- and student feedback

In week five we introduced the second questionnaire (appendix 4)

This gave us the first indication that the original concept of collaboration was having an effect on the group. Students indicated that although they had worked in groups before, they had not engaged as intimately in a partnership working on a project before.

Asked in the first question what it had been like working in a pair, the majority (88%) answered that it was an advantage with comments like;

'... it is interesting to work with someone from a different course, we both have very different ideas but work well together'

In bringing students together in pairs to work in a medium that neither were specialists in, we observed an unexpected learning outcome. Through their engagement with the imaginative and technical learning process, students began emulating each others' newly acquired skills, especially in the use of language to describe technical details. As we have already seen, only two out of twenty students were confident in using digital editing software at the start of the project and yet by week three of the project, students were talking confidently in a highly technical, descriptive language.

'Learning from another person while you are in their presence involves emulation –' Rose (2006)

This process suggests the students were actively engaging in a reflective practice by applying Kolb's cycle to the set task and emulating each other where one partner understood information before the other. The continual testing within the partnerships allowed them to gain confidence and expertise so that the weekly feedback session quickly developed a sophisticated language that was shared within the group. We discussed this method of learning with the group, encouraging an analytical sharing of experiences. The intention at this stage was to enable the students to recognize this process and encourage them to discuss how it could be applied to the project outcomes.

The second question confirmed their commitment to the project by asking how they carried out the tasks, which were set each week at the sessions;

100% said they collaborated on the initial idea and worked on the filming together.
88% got together to edit the work and 75% collaborated on the written work.

Asked about transferable skills, the over whelming opinion was that they had gained an enormous understanding of filming/editing and I.T. skills at this stage of the project. This was evident from the quality of visual work produced for the weekly showing and the language used at each meeting. Students spoke about being able to express visual ideas more effectively by having to write down their thoughts and feelings. We observed that the teaching seemed to be having a positive effect in actively engaging students. They were lively and alert during the weekly sessions.

'I'm interested in exploring the differences between writing about an object, talking about it and filming it. It's also a good exercise in collaboration between students from different courses.'

The students were then asked to summarise the differences between;

- **Making a film about an Object**

The most common response was that it was a purely visual medium.

Other returns acknowledged, ambiguity, expression and an ability to manipulate the viewer.

- **Writing about an Object**

The majority of students felt this enabled the writer to produce a clear description of the object. Other students acknowledged context, mental imaging and a way of concentrating on the object.

- **Talking about an Object**

This drew the most diverse response with one student observing;

'Explaining straight off the top of your head using words, emotions and body language. Usually (*produces*) an unrefined outcome.'

Another student responded; 'More descriptive exploration of function, visuals etc. focused solely on the object.'

There appeared to be little consensus within the group on this last question.

In general, students provided very short answers to these questions. Four returns were answered with only one word per question, the majority answered in one sentence. They were typical of the self - evaluation forms that students are required to write at the conclusion of workshop projects and historical and critical studies units, especially at level 1.

Teaching strategy.

At the midway point in the project, students had become confident working collaboratively, producing digital films to a set brief and critically analysing their work when we met together. The group had bonded well and everyone was actively participating in the assignments. This was also the point at which we, as teachers, stood back to reflect on how the initial method of collaboration was affecting learning and teaching.

Students had initially entered a teacher-directed learning environment. We had set up the aims and provided the means by constructing and leading the session, which involved student participation, a lecture and a technical workshop. The model we were seeking to explore was reflective learning as exemplified by Cowan (1999), and which now included peer learning. Biggs (2003) categorises teaching and learning activities into three main areas; Teacher-directed, Peer-directed and Self-directed. He advocates being clear about matching teaching strategy with learning outcomes to elicit the appropriate form of learning. We therefore needed to be very clear about how our strategies were working and where we were going next if we were to test reflective methods.

We had previously designed the project to move to an on-line blog-site half way through, where the weekly task could be posted and critically evaluated by students and staff within a secure environment. This would require the students to work both collaboratively on the weekly task and have an autonomous voice away from the fixed group session. Feedback could be given when the work is posted, instead of waiting for the weekly session to come around. This was in order to support a continually accessible reflective process (Laurillard (2005);

'...the student must reflect on the task goal, their action on it, and the feedback they received, and link this to their description of their conception of the topic goal.' (pg78)

We had already asked the students what their position was regarding the use of blog sites, see above, and although 85% of the students had a personal blog site, (facebook or myspace) not one single student was using a blog site offered by the university. It was therefore interesting to receive a positive reaction from all students when we showed them the CETLD2 blog site. (Appendix 5) The site and the instructions for its use were introduced during a formal session with each student occupying a computer and all were assisted in navigating through the site. The students posted an initial reaction to the move on line:

'This project will enable us to learn using digital media and spoken word. It will be applied to objects within collections, and presented in short film. A collection of these films will then be posted to the blog site for discussion and appraisal!'

'I think this project will be exciting once we have all filled out our (*blog page*) profiles and more people visit the site and are aware of what we do as designers. I am also interested in getting public feedback and see what reactions my work evokes.'

Two interesting points emerged straight away;

1. We had assumed that the students would want to work in a restricted on-line environment in order to post and receive critical analysis but this may have been incorrect as the above student suggests. The students were very comfortable about going live, even to the extent of having parents and friends contributing to the blog site. Their sense of audience seemed to lie in a confusion of professional, academic and social groups. The decision to keep the site restricted was taken after a very healthy debate on the nature and function of the blog site. It was agreed that an edited site would be constructed at the end of the project, which would be fully accessible to the general public.
2. Although the students were excited by the introduction of the blog site, they were confused by the display of their work. In the viewing theatre, they stood up to present their written work which was immediately followed by showing their film on a very large screen. The on-line blog site looked very professional but the film work came up on a tiny screen. (8cm x 6cm). Again, we focused on the target audience and the learning outcomes. The students made independent arrangements to show their work in the viewing theatre in order to maintain that experience.

Initially, most of the group used the blog to post their work to and interact with other students work (Appendix 6) as well as to respond to questions posed by my colleague or myself. Some students were aware of a visible development of their work and of the shared experience the blog was offering;

'i am pleased with some of my films and others i'm not so excited about. its good to get feedback from students and i like the honesty that's being used, i don't always get that at crits.'

All students were active in some way although not every one added comments preferring either to observe the process or use the site simply as a depository for

completed tasks. This last point raised questions about the effect the blog site had on a group in which all students had previously been engaging in discussions. Were some students now becoming surface learners? Or had we previously made incorrect assumptions about the group?

Most students were quite relaxed in using the blog site ; one student reflected 'I wrote in a less formal way as I was sharing it with people I knew...'

Another student observed, 'the site made me consider how the film would work in relation to the other films on the site,'

Final session

The group met up at the last session to discuss and reflect on the course as a whole. We divided the students into three groups and asked them to consider one of three questions, which would then be fed back to the group for discussion. They were specifically chosen to allow the students to reflect on the project and assess the learning process. (Appendix 7)

The feed back to each question produced at least seven well-considered bullet point sentences, which provided the basis for a lively and intelligent discussion. It was noted that all students were again actively participating within their discussion groups.

We then asked the students to individually answer the same questions we had posed in week five which looked at the differences between the component parts of the project. There was a considerable difference between the two returns in terms of the volume of words used to express opinions. There was also a change in the descriptive and analytical use of language to reflect on their experience.

The students were asked to summarise the differences between;

- **Making a film about an Object**

'Film is visual. You could make a film that literally portrays the object as the maker intended it to be seen, or through filming and editing you can change the view of the object and make it be seen in different ways/change how people see it.'

'I would say this is the most effective way to communicate things about an object as it allows you to show objects through different situations...'

- **Writing about an Object**

'Writing about an object can be very descriptive but it can be quite flat and lifeless. It is a good way to explain why and how you did something.'

'To write about an object can establish its meaning and create a visual image of it in the minds of others but is a limited means of creating an experience of an object.'

- **Talking about an Object**

'Talking about an object is quite easy but sometimes hard to not repeat yourself or put what you are saying in the correct order and be completely clear.'

'Talking about an object can be very expressive but is sometimes not the most clear description...'

The session concluded with a discussion reflecting on how language and image combined together can become an important part of studio work and how new insights into the making and display of objects impacts upon critical writing about them. This theme was further explored in 2,000 word essays, which History of Design and Visual Culture

students were required to write to fulfill assessment criteria for their option course unit.

A selection of films and written texts was exhibited in the main Faculty building, which gave the project a more public profile and aroused considerable interest amongst staff and students.

A presentation of initial findings was given at the CETLD centre shortly after the end of the project and an interim report was published on the CETLD Website, link - 'See What I'm Saying.'

The two final films and accompanying texts were jointly assessed by both tutors and grades, together with verbal feedback and discussion, were given at a final group meeting.

Evaluation

It was interesting to see how influential a pedagogical theory such as reflection-in-action was on the introduction of new technological methods of learning and teaching. The project focused on combining visual, written and spoken experiences of object creation and collections by introducing collaboration, a blog site and questionnaires as methods for research. Regrettably, the anticipated use of wikki sites and mobile phones to record moving image, were both technically elusive during this projects' live period.

All the participating students had elected to do this project, which definitely gave the group a strong identity; this may have been an important factor when the blogging process was introduced. It should be noted that some students experienced difficulties in uploading films to the website which meant that the site became unreliable over the latter part of the project. This had a frustrating effect on some students who felt they were missing out and not being able to post work as intended. A way was found to correct this but confidence drained away quickly and work was presented on CD backup for assessment, as a precaution. Blogging also diminished considerably. Where students were successful, the blog site worked well – one student engaged in the process from Japan for a short period. Moving onto the blog site half way through the project timetable did present some risks as it took it away from a predictable learning environment. It is possible that the blog site encouraged some students to become less active and may have contributed to them taking a surface approach (Biggs (2003). A further study which incorporates a more reliable and universal access to the blogsite resources and a closer look at 'critical chatting' may encourage students to remain confident when technical problems occur.

Feedback had been established early on as a very important part of this project. In some ways we had been engaging in a weekly critique of the set tasks, which had a similar effect as an ongoing formative assessment. Posting on-line gave us an opportunity to continue with the group tutorial and cover ground thoroughly; it was one of the most positive outcomes. The blog site was very different to the face to face teaching and required being disciplined in accessing computers regularly. It was noted that students often posted at unusual times of the day and night, although giving students

responsibility for posting comments and assignments at any time could be seen as a potential learning goal.

During the last session, discussion within the group about the value of sharing and reflecting, both on the blog site and during the weekly sessions was clearly evident. One student fed back:-

'I think that the whole experience of actually studying the creative aspect of our course has been really valuable in understanding the study of objects.'

There was a noticeable development in the use of critical language to express ideas in conjunction with visual media, which was evidenced in the questionnaires, evaluative form returns and especially in the 200 word moving image analysis reports. The content and visual quality of the films also developed in sophistication as the project progressed. Technically the students were able to manipulate the film editing software to produce good quality work in a relatively short period of time and this process may have been assisted by the pairing up of students from different courses as well as capitalising on existing skills and experiences, which facilitated immediate negotiation and sharing. The results of the project will shortly be published on-line with public access to the 'See What I'm Saying' web site archive of student work.

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APPENDIX I Timetable

SEE WHAT I'M SAYING?

week	Friday afternoon 2.00 – 4.30	venue
2 6 Oct	Introduction to project and project theme Organising pairs Filming and Editing Session Set work for next week – 20 sec film theme- building blocks Burn to CD – NO AUDIO - plus 200 word presentation	GP Main Building 204
3 13 Oct	Review set task – 12 sec. Film Lecture Museum Collections Film- Perfect Human Set work for week 4 – 20 sec film theme- Collecting – NO AUDIO - Burn to CD plus 200 word presentation	GP Main Building 204
4 20 Oct	Field trip to V&A Museum Meet at V&A for briefing and tasks Set work for week 5 – 30 sec film theme- covert - NO AUDIO	V&A museum
5 27 Oct	Interviewing Practitioners – looking for insights. Lecture Linda Sandino Seminar session. Connecting the film clips into a sequential narrative, putting on a voice track. Set task – 20 sec film theme – Senses (use audio)	GP Main Building 204
6 3 Nov	Review of the set task from week 5 Technical Workshop Burn to CD plus 200 word processed analysis – What's going on ? must happen in wmcpc workshops.	GP Main Building 204
7 10 Nov	Review of set task from week 6 Lecture 'Going onto the Community' –Stan Stanier Post work to site with 200 word analysis	Off Site room G1 Mithras Annex
8 17 Nov	READING WEEK Sign-up tutorials in computer room – pavilion parade 2.00 – 4.00	Computer room Pavilion parade
9 24 Nov	Lecture - Dave Clarke 'the V&A and my work' Set work for this week, which must be posted to Community site – one-minute film theme- aide memoir with 200 word-processed analysis.	GP Main Building 204
10 1 Dec	Field Trip Second Visit to the V&A Meet at V&A for briefing and tasks Set work for posting to internet – TWO film clips on one theme – what's it supposed to be? 1 minute each with 200 word-processed analysis.	V&A museum
11 8 Dec	Final Session Reflection and resolution of visual project work – Group tutorial and questionnaire.	GP Main Building 204 and on-line BLOG site.
12 15 Dec	Post finished work to Web Site for assessment On-Line Feedback	On-line BLOG site.
13 9 March	View final submissions on large screen for Crit session and feedback of marks.	3.30 Pavillion Parade site

APPENDIX 2

Themes

SET THEMES:

1. Building Blocks
2. Collections
3. Fake
4. Covert
5. What's Going On?
6. Aide Memoir
7. What's It Supposed to be?

APPENDIX 3

Questionnaire 1

Do you have a personal blog site?	
Have you left a comment on someone else's blog site?	
Please list the names of any blog sites you are aware of;	
Are you aware that the University of Brighton has a blog site?	
Can you name it?	
How could a blog site assist your study/research at college?	
Can you see a positive or negative use for blog sites for college study?	

APPENDIX 4
Questionnaire 2

'See What I'm Saying?'

1. What has it been like working in a pair?
(please tick and briefly explain reasons for your answer;)

An Advantage

A Disadvantage

2. How have you carried out the tasks involved in each brief?
(Please tick)

together

seperately

- Initial Idea
- Filming
- Editing
- Presentation

3. What have you learned from working on the project so far?


4. How would you summarise the differences between;-

- **Making a film about an object?**

- **Writing about an object?**

- **Taking about an object?**

APPENDIX 5
Screen Shot - Blog Site



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[Home](#) [The Rules](#) [Account settings](#)

Welcome Patrick Letschka

See What I'm Saying

[Edit this profile](#) | [Community site picture](#) | [Edit community details](#) | [View membership requests](#)


Introduction

'See what I'm saying?'

Patrick Letschka, Jill Seddon of the Faculty of Arts & Architecture, University of Brighton

This research project will use current technologies that undergraduate students personally own, carry and use on a daily basis, (mobile phones, blackberries, slim cameras) and re-focus these technologies into the academic practice of visual research in order to examine, reflect on and articulate the process of object creation. By proposing a collaboration between level 2 undergraduate students at the University of Brighton, who are studying 3D design and students of History of Decorative Arts and Design, it is envisaged that the outcome of this project will be an archive of short moving image research. Initially small mixed groups of students will work on a digital film piece lasting 1 minute but this will extend to pieces 3 or 4 minutes in length as the project unfolds. The project will be explored and supported through e-learning, wikki site construction as well as specialist workshops and lectures, which will be video recorded.

These two groups of level 2 students are already developing a distinct approach to the made object and they already bring with them a high level of expertise in using portable recording technology. By combining these elements, through a managed teaching and learning environment, it will enable students to develop a fresh way of examining objects, both visually and through language. An emphasis will also be placed on articulating the design and making process by integrating language with Visual Research through film. Part of the project will include using existing collections of objects at either the V&A or Brighton Museum, a connection which has the potential for future growth.



See What I'm Saying

[RSS](#) | [Tags](#) | [Resources](#)
 Applying visual research through digital media and spoken language to objects in collections

See What I'm Saying's Content

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APPENDIX 6 Screen Shot - Blog Site



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See What I'm Saying :: Weblog :: Dave Clarke - Silversmith

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November 24, 2006



[Restricted] Dave Clarke - Silversmith

what was your impression of Dave and perhaps more importantly - what did you remember most about his talk to us?

[Edit] [Delete]

Posted by Patrick Letschka @ See What I'm Saying |

Comments

- the bit i remmber most about his talk is the way he talked about the fish/cake slice display cases. i find it incredible that such a world class gallery can display their pieces so badly yet still think nothing's wrong with it. also I was Interested by dave's comments on the fact that the v+a have kept his work in storage and refuse to put it out on display. i thought the talk was very interesting because it gave an incite into what relations between artist and museum can be like becuae as a visitor you never appreciate that things are anything other than the finished, polished, shiny surface of the museum that we see when walking round it.



Caroline Saul on Wednesday, December 2006, GMT Standard Time #

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Welcome Patrick Letschl



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APPENDIX 7

State how the blog site had an effect on the way you ;-

Wrote the 200 words?

Made your film?

How would you summarise the differences between;-

Making a film about an object?

Writing about an object?

Taking about an object?