



Distributed e-learning in Art, Design, Media: an investigation into current practice

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7. Conclusions and recommendations

It is clear that ICT-related activities are a significant feature of the higher education landscape in art, design and media and that the sector has identified and continues to develop its relationship to core technologies. Redefinitions of key educational activities have already occurred or are currently taking place, and there is a high investment of time in ICT-related developments. A number of significant points emerged in the study, and conclusions and recommendations will be considered under 3 key headings: the change potential of ICT in art, design and media; identification of specialist needs and opportunities; training and professional development of staff.

- The change potential of ICT in art, design and media

An issue emerging from the research is the potential of e-learning to change key processes, understandings and activities associated with these disciplines. This type of change rests on the potential for structures of thought and action to be redefined within distributed learning environments that are technology rich. It may extend, as the literature suggests, to new definitions of intelligent practice and to the loss of traditional areas of competence. There is already evidence that much of the activity for which ICT is currently being used in art, design and media (as elsewhere in higher education) is associated with the publication and dissemination of information and with communications via email, discussion forums and so on. They therefore involve a communicative mode that is predominantly verbal and written in nature. The technologies involved provide powerful support for particular kinds of engagement and respondents in this study recorded their extensive use of the PC, which tended to promote administrative, archiving and publication functions.

However respondents also recorded high levels of use of the Mac computer and the software for which it provides a reliable platform; these specialist applications add another dimension to the text-oriented capability of mainstream ICT solutions and are a crucial resource for more vocationally referenced learning. They provide the main technological tools for delivery of the subject specific curriculum in many areas of art, design and media. There is a downside to this, however, with the ubiquity of these technologies leading to widespread concerns within the sector about potential downgrading of the kind of learning that comes through making. This point is

brought out in the literature and was supported by respondents in the research. Tutors expressed concerns about the quality of student achievement in specialist areas, and the potential for under-skilling as a result of technology dependence. For their part, students were concerned that more traditional skills and talents unrelated to computer technologies were being undervalued; they also worried about the encroachment of non-artists and non-designers into specialist domains. These challenges are put into perspective by comments in the literature about the inevitability of our use of available technologies (Salomon et al., 1991) and the likelihood that perceptions of intelligent practice will change. New ways of deploying specialist capabilities are emerging, and the new sets of skills that are required for them.

- Identification of specialist needs and opportunities

A picture emerged of subject specialist needs and activities under these new conditions. There was evidence that respondents were using the digital environment to pursue traditional art, design and media activities in a new forum – for example by using ‘online crits’, ‘digital portfolios’, ‘electronic presentations’ of work for assessment and ‘submission of online critical reviews’. However, it is important to remember that despite evidence of take-up of these extensive opportunities, almost half of respondents had yet to exploit them at the time of completing the survey. This may be partly explained by tutors’ perceptions of the most valuable environments for promoting learning. Studio and workshop spaces were ranked highly, as were seminar and tutorial rooms, but these spaces were much less likely to be resourced with core technologies than staff offices. There were clear indications, however, that core learning technologies were in the process of being distributed across institutional space and increasingly integrated into established teaching areas.

A key use made of ICT related to its ability to enable enhanced interactions with professional destinations. For example, multimedia technologies allowed students to be introduced to the work of eminent (and less well-known) practitioners and to hear the professionals in question talk about their work. Subject-related websites, electronic databases and the websites of professionals in related fields also provided opportunities for such interactions, supporting students’ developing participation in relevant communities of practice. Apart from such outward-looking activities, staff were also beginning to experiment with in-house use of multimedia to improve delivery, for example by recording workshops and practical skills sessions. Nonetheless the uptake of e-learning, and ICT use in general, was unevenly spread across the wide range of art, design and media disciplines. In some fields the available technologies had not yet proved their worth in supplanting traditional materials and means, and Fine Art was one instance cited. Many of the advantages that tutors perceived in ICT use related to enhancement of capability in symbolic representation, however, and this clearly offers opportunities for all art, design and media fields. There is a caveat here that was pointed out both by study respondents and in the literature, and that is the potential for ICT to ‘mask’ and render invisible the processes of making. Schenk (op. cit.) notes that this can affect learning by making ‘professional processes’ less recorded and less available to the learner’s view than they once were. It seems appropriate to suggest that we use the better means of recording ‘process’ offered by ICT and that we integrate these records into learning activities.

The issue of securing specialist art, design and media knowledge leads to another consideration that emerged from the research. This relates to the higher demands on ICT space made art, design and media programmes, making it important to consider subject specific needs and to include these requirements in institutional plans for digital accommodation. The technological incompatibilities that were also a major focus of concern for study respondents have the potential to limit access to e-learning, and need to be addressed. It appears that the institutional adoption of VLEs has helped to simplify ICT engagement to some extent, but we still seem to some distance from the goal of ‘single portal’ access to all applications.

- Training and professional development of staff.

The problem of finding ways to support continuing professional development for staff in ICT use was a key issue emerging in the research. It was not possible to determine any fixed pattern of institutional arrangements for this, although the trend seemed to be for an increasingly prescriptive approach on behalf of employers. There also appeared to be a growing role for centralized units which had a remit to develop learning and teaching within institutions. A more equitable distribution of staff training emerged where institutions had clearly articulated expectations in this regard, particularly where these were linked to strategic aims and to cycles of staff review and appraisal. This is unsurprising, of course, but in higher education there has often been a focus on individuals exercising their own preferences in regard to professional development. However the current situation is already placing high demands on all lecturing staff, and it would probably be beneficial for institutions to describe the competences expected and the ways in which they will support individuals in achieving them. It is significant that respondents in the study described their need not only for 'training' in ICT use and applications, but in the more complex areas related to e-pedagogies. There may be a role here for national organizations such as the Higher Education Academy to develop and disseminate a coherent set of principles for e-learning.

Problems of time, skills acquisition and workload were seen as the major barriers to e-learning development by staff, and it seems sensible to suggest that these can only be addressed in relationship to institutional infrastructures. The training and access to ICT resources of part-time staff is of particular relevance to the sector, with its traditional high ratios of part-time to full-time tutors; if e-learning is to realize its potential in the sector this significant part of the workforce will need to be included in the development of best practice.