

Teaching design from a distance: the deviantArt case of Virtual Design Studio

Design studio is a dominant teaching method for art and design, promoting exploration and peer learning. Virtual Design Studio (VDS) addresses the needs of distance learners. A VDS case study using deviantArt (an online platform for designers) during a Graphic Design Course, is presented.

Design Studio has been dominant in design education for the Arts, Architecture, and Design since the the Bauhaus School in the 1940s. Studio is a space for discussions and experimentation, emphasizing communication and cooperation between peers. Students learn by experiencing (hands-on), while tutors monitor their progress and make observations which guide their analytical and synthetic skills.

For the needs of distance learners and through the advances of ICT technology, several ways of VDS practice have emerged [2], yet, there is no single established model that replicates the design studio method in a digital context. VDS has three significant differences to the traditional design studio [3]: participants are geographically distributed; the teaching and learning occur via digital objects; and the communication can be either asynchronous or synchronous. Asynchronous communication increases the tutors' schedule flexibility. However, written communication tends to be more time-consuming than discussion and the large amount of data to be processed and of feedback required, can increase the tutor's workload [1]. Feedback in VCD is not immediate, and is limited to only the uploaded designs. The development of subsequent drafts by students is thus affected [5]. Interaction between participants (partly dependant on their ICT skills) may not be as rich or immediate as in the traditional design studio, and is affected by factors such as limited screen resolution, bandwidth, as well as the psychological and practical constraints of virtual communication.

A pilot use of a *deviantArt*-based VDS was set up aiming to facilitate a distance learners course in Graphic Design of the Hellenic Open University (HOU). At the end of the academic year an evaluation was carried out in order to assess its validity as a distance teaching method for design and identify its weaknesses, strengths and improvement opportunities.

DeviantArt was used as a delivery platform, as it directly displayed visuals without the navigation overload of other online collaborative virtual environments. Fifty multidisciplinary students from three classes (guided by three tutors), geographically disperse, participated in the 2010-2011 academic year. The students were treated as a single group in the context of VDS. A total of 5 assignment folders were created, 720 images were posted in academic year 2010-11, with 6,321 page views. Many images were left without any comments, which upset the students, as the availability of feedback from peers and tutors was seen as an important and necessary part of the design studio process. Nevertheless, the possibility to see an overview of design solutions in each assignment and to compare one's work against others', was taken up by students and was regarded favorably. This was particularly beneficial for the weaker students, especially those with backgrounds not related to arts, as it improved their understanding of the assignments requirements, and made them more aware of quality and assessment criteria. Finally, 27 students responded in 32 questions (using Likert scale) of an online questionnaire set up by the HOU Evaluation Unit.

The findings report that most of the responding students have used deviantArt to upload designs in 3 to 4 assignments. They received -mostly from their peers- a satisfactory amount of comments per overall assignment (2,7 comments per assignment) although some of the designs were left uncommented. Although they consider the amount of comments beyond average (2,3/5) they reported benefits from being able to view all comments but mostly from viewing other designs (average response exceeding 'enough': 3,4/5).

Most students viewed positively their participation in a single VDS group. The discussion and commenting process online seemed to help a satisfactory establishment of group spirit (2,9/5), between the geographically disperse students of the participating classes.

On the negative side, there was not enough dissemination of the deviantArt global design community and the students. Exhibiting the students designs online (initially regarded as a benefit for using this platform), was not regarded successful. Views from other 'Devianters' into the course-designs scored very low and so did the students views to other designers outside their team.

Overall positive responses were gathered (3,4/5) for using deviantArt, when compared to other social networks, it's use sees as overall beneficial, and positively encouraging its future use for the course. In questions relating to 'ease of use' of the platform, the overall usability and the uploading images was considered satisfactory (3,4 /5), while adding comments scored high in ease of use (4,4 /5) and so did the viewing of both comments (4,2 /5) and images (3,9 /5).

Conclusions

Teaching design to a multi-disciplinary group of students in a distance education context marked by the lack of an established physical community of peers and by limited opportunities for face-to-face tuition is a significant challenge. An advantage of using the deviantArt platform is providing students with an overview of the work of their peers and peer-review comments, both acting as stimuli. A sense of student community is gained, which may otherwise be unattainable.

We would like to thank students, tutors of Graphic Design, and the HOU Evaluation Unit. Assignments can be accessed at <http://gtp-eap.deviantart.com/> .

References

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Irene Mavrommati

Hellenic Open University, School of Applied Arts
mavrommati@eap.gr

Panagiotis Fotaris

Hellenic Open University, School of Applied Arts
pfotaris@hotmail.com