

How Can Educators Make Online Work Well?
Communicating Through Graphic Design: Relevance, Focus, Reflection

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The Barcelona Conference on Education 2020
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

This paper connects best practices observed and developed through experiential learning in online forums, structured as open reflective spaces, with structured feed forwards. We are all online, constantly communicating, exchanging, learning, teaching, developing and creating. In such a vast space we often lose sight of the importance of the space itself. Almost every day we incur a vast number of digital learning experiences, that we have to face head on, often without a clear guide on how to find our way through the measureless steps. Creative thinking and reflecting continuously on our own practice is vital in understanding how to best cater for such diversity. The aim of this study is to observe best practice in online teaching and learning, drawn from a ten-year online practice and the observation of 32 online modules. Student Learning & Learner Diversity is at the core of teaching in an online space and structured praxis is essential in order to encourage, assist and maintain engagement across tasks. Design seizes “difference” as an opportunity to be developed and enhanced, a space to finetune and embrace flaws and limitations, supporting and encouraging a multitude of different perspectives. When supported correctly the collective strength of the online space, along with the materials and reflections of the cohort body, work together symbiotically as constantly evolving innovative spaces.

Keywords: Pedagogy, Communication, Graphic Design, Reflection, Diversity, Distance Learning, Coaching, Online Learning, Reflective Practice, Praxis, Educators, Online, University, Cultural Differences, Achievement, Motivation

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Introduction

In 2020 the outbreak of Covid pushed Universities into new territory, communicating and exchanging ideas and theories at a distance. This is not wholly a new practice there are several institutions that have been delivering distance learning programmes online for some time. To make online work well, it is important to recognise flexibility and accessibility as the core drivers of change to design learning materials and methods of teaching and learning that remove barriers, moving education into the future.

Higher Education Institutes (HEI's) have been faced with dramatic change to the design of teaching and learning materials, a change that was an inevitable progression for campus-based practitioners teaching in a digital world. Sped up by Covid-19 the consequence of this new direction in teaching and learning has presented many practitioners with an unprecedented level of problems.

With the 2020 Covid-restrictions the significance of 'place' has been put into question and the functional relevance of online learning pushed to the fore, exchanging the conventional space for the unconventional space and the importance of design is now in focus. Professor of Higher Education at the University of Oxford, Simon Marginson stated, students generally report that university is much more than just tuition—place is also really important. Another prevalent fear amongst practitioners is, how can we protect more people from the impact of full- or part-automation of roles, and prepare them to take advantages of the changes coming from the fourth industrial revolution, working alongside machines and AI?' (Design Council, 2020). In order to progress through the digital revolution, we need to embrace and not fear new ways of teaching, learning and working and receive new digital channels of communication, with an open and balanced perspective.

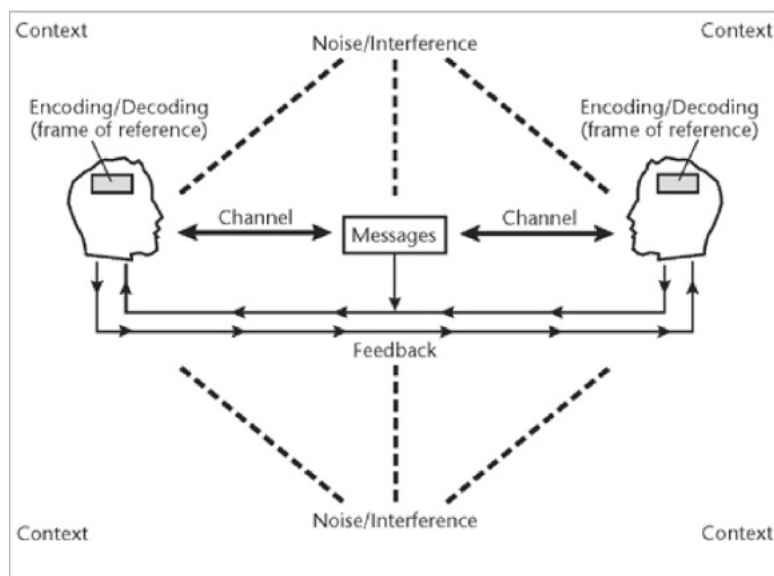


Figure 1. The communication process (Dunn, Goodnight, 2014).

Decoding is the process of interpreting or attaching meaning to another person's message. Communication often stops because people decode messages differently

based on their frame of reference. Because of diverse attitudes, knowledge, and past experiences, receivers often interpret messages differently from the way they were intended by the senders. (Dunn, Goodnight, 2014).

Margaret Youngblood is a San Francisco graphic designer, vice president and creative director at Banana Republic ‘You cannot problem solve unless you understand and approach problems from a holistic standpoint: economically, socially and culturally.’ (Holland, 2020).

A key focus of communicating online is the ability to recognise and embrace difference, a particular human skill unique within each of us. However, it is also important to pay attention to the difference between what ‘difference’ and ‘diversity’ mean individually. Difference is a comparator of non-similar things and diversity is a range of different things.

“It is not our differences that divide us. It is our inability to recognize, accept, and celebrate those differences.” — Audre Lorde, *Our Dead Behind Us: Poems*

Page states in order ‘to realise the benefits of diversity, we need logic and theory to identify the types of diversity that improve outcomes and to understand the conditions under which they do so. And then we need practice. The heart of Graphic Design and design-focused disciplines embraces diversity and uses a practice of theory and practice-based problem solving to arrive at the best solutions. According to the Design Council, 2020, design skills will be necessary skills in every sector of industry in the world ‘43% of people working across the economy using these skills are in jobs that generate innovation, creative thinking and problem-solving’.

In the 21st Century transferable skills are essential and developing networking skills, maintaining collaborative relationships with people, and making decisions as a team are considered essential skills to be successful in the new era (Collins and Halverson 2009; Reigeluth 1999; Partnership for 21st Century Skills 2011). This suggests that every subject can benefit from the structured holistic practices used in design, where diversity is celebrated as innovation and a source for change.

One of the important factors in distance learning is recognising how diversity effects the shared space, the consumption of knowledge and how diversity and difference in learning style needs should be considered when creating materials at any level of engagement. It is only through encountering cultures and belief systems unlike our own that we learn anything about the flaws and limitations inherent in our own perspectives, (IAFOR, 2020)

To answer the question, how can educators make online work well, the focus of this paper is on the distance learning delivery of graphic design. Through building, developing, authoring, leading and teaching online courses the author’s personal practice has highlighted a number of key points, and allowed key insights found working over 10 years in online educational practice, observing and teaching across 32 modules to be shared. New light can be shed on the creative and useful nature of the online learning space. Creative thinking and reflecting continuously on our own practice is vital in understanding how to best cater for such diversity. Design seizes “difference” as an opportunity to be developed and enhanced.

On the subject of transforming education, it's important to recognize that we are remodelling the delivery of the message. As Marshall McLuhan said, 'The medium is the message' and the greater the medium the bigger the message and the internet is a vast data space, with minimal limitations.

Around nine years ago the author was asked to create an online graphics degree for which there were very few reference points or similar courses that required the production of such a vast array of artefacts at a distance. Graphic design requires a lot of studio practice and often relies heavily on the development of a community of practice. This is usually achieved within physical communal studio spaces where students can share ideas. After a period of trial and error, successful iterations produced a working model that created the basis of a working version of the physical studio space online. The initial online teaching and learning method was developed over a duration of five years, 2012- 2016, and is known as the 'discovery co-operative' coaching and discovery-learning model. Through 'discovery co-operative' coaching and a discovery-learning model both tutors and students are empowered to identify and address problems and developmental issues quicker and the competencies of the design course can be achieved faster through improved online cohesion. (Ord-Shrimpton, 2016). The model released in 2017 included previous model components in combination with the refined online studio practice forum model (Ord-Shrimpton, 2019).

The key focus of employing these two models together allows tutors to build on environments of learning and harness the power of distributed creativity, referring to situations where collaborating groups of individuals collectively generate a shared creative product. The term collaborative emergence refers to these group processes (Sawyer, 2003a), collaborative emergence is known as 4 points: the activity, moment-to-moment contingency, the interactional effect and the process is collaborative. (Sawyer, Dezutter, 2009).

Closing the teaching and learning loop with a final stage of further structured development is presented in this paper as the C Model which has been reworked and refined over the duration of the last nine years.

Components of difference in teaching online

The challenge in designing technological systems is reconciling the competing priorities of technical feasibility, functional usability, what people want technology to do, and the demands of site-specific use. (AIGA, 2020). As a result of the pandemic thousands of teachers, lecturers and professors have been thrust into the digital sphere without understanding the complexities of different technologies, the importance of difference in terms of country-specific learning styles and the location specific interactions and nuance of face-to-face. All of these form a new zone of proximal development, (Vygotsky, 1934); it is now not just knowing what the learner can do, but also what is the educator able to do?

Key insights found through delivering online educational content have helped answer the questions, how do we embrace difference and how can we make online work well?

Observations from personal practice show:

- The global learner will experience many different learning methods - it is important that educators combine learning methods to ensure inclusive engagement applies balanced cultural homogeneity.
- Teaching and learning content must incorporate distributed creativity and collaborative emergence.
- Discovery co-operative coaching should be employed together with the online studio practice forum model.
- The learning content should consider, contain and add notes to the global learner's cultural diversity.

In 2020 the concept of 'difference' has yet to be integrated into all of our systems and processes. In education there are hundreds of differences and it is important for educators to embrace each of these differences and seize them as opportunities for positive growth and development. Digital skills and a digital framework should be encouraged across all levels of learning, even if the core focus is not digital. Tutors need digital skills, the establishment of a shared understanding, common purpose and goals (JISC, 2020). From the findings of this practice, the framework should take into account the following:

- Teaching methods
- Student learning styles
- Cultural styles of learning
- Age in learning
- Level in learning
- Number of years a student has been learning
- Subjects learnt prior to learning new subject
- Work based practice in learning relevance
- Neurodiversity

Using an informed approach to recognise, accept and guide we can create learning environments that embrace and enhance each difference using a framework of continuous student and educator focused reflection in our digital practice.

Online educators should take time to understand the sensitive learner in two specific ways, neurodiversity and digital capabilities, and should be willing to adapt old and new methods to fit in with new technology rather than simply expecting to transfer all campus skills directly into the digital arena. Precise observation and consideration of the above framework elements should be factored in.

How do we embrace difference in a distance learning space?

Diversity refers to the great variety of human characteristics—ways that we are different even as we are all human and share more similarities than differences. These differences are an essential part of what enriches humanity, and moving beyond “us” versus “them,” and beyond fear, is crucial to civil society, (University of Saskatchewan, 2020). There is no prerequisite set of rules that can be applied to any one distance learning space, as they can vary so immensely. However, applying specific attributes that can be built on and developed over time are essential to developing good distance learning practice. Attributes such as awareness and respect

of diversity and difference, paying attention to one's own bias, developing a good ethical viewpoint and developing a line of inquiry into each student's learning style, help tutors to engage and coach students to assist them to identify their strongest attributes and areas for development, which is in keeping with Haider's research, which found knowing students' learning styles at the beginning of the online forums enabled a tutor to see when they needed to gently manoeuvre specific students to move out from their comfortable and secure learning styles to the one which is unfamiliar and uncomfortable (Haider, 2015).

Particular to graphic design is the generation and consumption of images, through the practice discussed here, observations of cultural identity have a big impact on the consumption of images. Communication through visualization is at the same time pictorial and linguistic. It is socially and culturally conditioned, based on familiar linguistic patterns, as in a 'pie chart' metaphor for market shares or a 'starry night' metaphor showing data in 3D (Bertschi & Bubenhofer, 2005). In consideration of this factor, educators should be mindful of all visual content and adapt and substitute content where necessary, to respect cultural diplomacy, for example HSBC created a series of adverts about local cultures and travel that identified the importance of respecting local knowledge, paying attention to the sensitive customs within each culture.

Each educator should aim to adopt and adapt skills on the fly as new solutions are found. When team members think differently...their collective performance includes a diversity bonus, an extra amount. That bonus is a quantifiable, measurable value add...Diversity bonuses challenge narrow "meritocratic" thinking. Diversity bonuses mean that the best team will not, as a rule, consist of the best performing individuals. The best team will include diverse thinkers (Page, 2017). Online teaching requires international humility and inclusion, where a team of diverse educators meets a student cohort equally if not more diverse, teaching considerations that incorporate elements of all student diversity will have the most significant impact on distributed creativity in online forums. The online forum is an expedient way to connect students across vast distances and it allows them to share intimate cultural knowledge. Working and communicating across cultures and disciplines requires more time for a group to balance and understand each other's differences. It does not necessarily come naturally to students to mix in culturally diverse groups, but it is indeed an important opportunity for students to learn to work together with people not necessarily acting exactly like them. (Frydenlund, 2017)

According to Page, cognitive diversity differs from identity diversity - differences in race, gender, age, physical capabilities, and sexual orientation. That said, identity diversity, along with education and work and life experience, will be a contributor to those differences. Why is diversity so important? There are many reasons, as the University of Saskatchewan so eloquently states:

- Experiencing diversity at university prepares students for the diversity they will encounter the rest of their lives
- Students learn better in a diverse educational setting.
- Attention to diversity leads to a broader range of teaching methods, which benefits the learning process for all students.
- Experiencing diversity makes us all better citizens in our democracy.
- Diversity enhances self-awareness.

The findings of this practice support the above points, as design engenders a strong ethical practice and a continuous process of reflection, not only on the individual's learning capabilities, development and achievement; but with a strong focus on the ethics, unconscious bias and diversity involved on each specific project. This ongoing process of evolving reflection and awareness can be seen in the way students begin to comment and reflect on each other's work over time. The students are developing a sustainable, globally tenable, reflective practice. As Nussbaum clearly stated in 1997, our primary goal should be to produce students who have a Socratic knowledge of their own ignorance – both of other world cultures and, to a great extent, of our own. These students, when they hear simplistic platitudes about cultural difference, will not be inclined to take them at face value; they will question, probe, and inquire. Because they have a basic awareness of cultural and methodological issues, they will have a way of pursuing their questions further. They will approach the different with an appropriate humility, but with good intellectual equipment for the further pursuit of understanding. These traits, so important to a citizen today's interdependent work, are very unlikely to be developed by personal experience alone.

The quintessential benefit of online learning using online forums where work is shared and discussed, is that social levelling affords every participant an equal chance to share their voice, ask questions, observe and review content, use forums and assessment work on a level playing field. Through practising online the subtleties of each learning style become more apparent and this enables the educator to tailor learning resources through a solid process of reflection to create an educational environment that is all encompassing, if the components of difference are embraced. For example, the sensitive student is able to fully express their work and opinions online in a way that they may be unable to express in public situations. Anonymity afforded by the digital space in combination with a well organised forum space encourages learners from all backgrounds to share and contribute more extensively to the collective shared learning experience.

Embracing difference not only in terms of learning background and cultural diversity, but also individual experience enables educators to make online work well.

Conclusion: Reflective teaching and learning embraces difference

Reflection engenders independent learning, to quote one of Forster's 4 points on the subject of independent learning (1972) it includes freedom of choice in determining those objectives, within the limits of a given project or program and with the aid of a faculty adviser. Learners are now in a global competition for work. Reflective spaces enable learners to be prepared for industry, to be immersed in an experience that caters for and imitates industry and this can be different in different cultures.

A reflective practice should be employed at every stage of the learning process, fostering an open continuous reflective practice helps educators and students to see and identify flaws and embrace difference. The critical role of tutors is to be directive, supportive, a resource depending on individual students' needs and group needs. In a nutshell, tutors have to become leaders to shape, influence and support as well as encourage, enable and empower students to become critically reflective (Haider, 2015).

Real-time spaces can often pose problems for different cultures however, digital spaces encourage open flexible discussion, and this helps to merge cultural expectations. The teaching and learning model used in this case harnesses the power of real-time forum discussion, allowing each student the time to reflect in action and apply active learning through forum interaction. Feedback from a broad demographic and spectrum of input is essential in the design cycle and the virtual online studio forum provides students with access to a broad array of peer input, (Ord-Shrimpton. 2019). Which is supported by the thinking of Iba and Miyake in 2010, who wrote, in recent complex society, it is essential to find problems and think of solutions from various points of view with a creative mind. People need to learn ability to practice their ideas and create new viewpoints and ways of thinking. It is also necessary to construct their own living knowledge based on their situation, not just by memorizing existing information. Under present circumstances, a few people can realize such a creative way of learning, but others do not seem to know how to do so.

Critical reflection consists of systematic reflection on practice against the backdrop of theories. In other words, the critical reflective process is all about digging and delving deeper by reflecting and questioning the questions and refusing to take things for granted. Also, critical reflections should lead students to become creative in their approach to social work. (Haider, 2015). Educators should practice online using a combination of Donald Schön's two levels of reflection: (i) reflection- in-action and (ii) reflection-on-action and Terry Borton, Reach, Touch and Teach from Borton's development framework, this is because the nuances of face to face and environmental teaching are not translatable at a distance, educators have to be more aware and use reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action to ensure that both teaching and learning takes place online.

It is advisable students should follow and use Graham Gibbs Reflective learning cycle (1988) and David Kolb's Experiential learning cycle, reflective observation (1984). Through practice, testing and observation, the consolidation of the methods above are combined in the C model, which is displayed in Figure 2. Students are recommended to use a continuous process of active reflection as soon as they enter the forum, because if they reflect too far after the date of the task in question they may get distracted and not achieve the intended outcomes. Students deconstruct the issues with theories and then reconstruct; this process enables students to become critically reflective, (Haider, 2015)

C Model



Fig 2. C Model

Outside of the design cycle used in design lessons a combination of reflection in action, active learning and experiential learning should be fed into the learning contents and a final feed forwards model employed to complete the cycle.

The C model was generated from observations of design principles in practice. The aim of the C model transforms and connects the learner, the learning space, the tasks and the assessment through reflective feedback and pedagogical feed forwards. The relevance focus refers to key details in relation to content and tasks, and clearly defined SMART actions (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and timely), updated in process based on student interactions within forum spaces. These actions encourage students through observation of the tutor commentary and peer-to-peer interactions to develop their critical analysis skills. In 2014, Al-Mubaid, evidenced the process of critical thinking is the process that leads to creativity in thinking and can be viewed as thinking and reasoning at its full strength. Teaching students how to think deeply while in their online course is one of the goals of this project where the main goal is to reach the highest level of quality thinking.

The first two parts of the C model are further consolidated in a streamlined list of feed forwards points that are outlined as brief but focussed notes on the assignment feedback after submission. This model closes the teaching and learning loop with relevance, focus, reflection and feed forwards, using a simple get things done (GTD) methodology, (Allen, 2015) that helps to generate positive outcomes and improvement in subsequent modules. Constructive alignment is a concept in teaching that aligns the teaching activities within a course with the aims of the course (Biggs & Tang, 2011). This means that all activities should lead to the attainment of the course objectives, and these course objectives should be highlighted as definitive points in a list in the feedforwards feedback.

The technique to communicating online effectively is to ensure that you consider the teaching and learning experience as a collaborative journey and not a one-to-many oration experience. The content must be clear, well planned and structured to assist

the learner to collaborate both independently and in teams, and feel confident in their actions to help them to move forward outside their comfort zone. Tutors must take time to be aware of cultural learning styles, expectations and behaviour and help them to shape their thinking and challenge their perceptions. Online spaces are open reflective spaces, that are continuously evolving and should not be seen with the same rigidity as physical spaces. When organised well, the digital space itself, (with timely guidance and orientation) harnesses the potential of the collective strength to embrace diversity by thinking creatively and spontaneously to produce performance enhanced results and embrace difference and global diversity.

Having gained deep insight from nine years of online practice it is hoped that the 3 teaching and learning models,

- Discovery co-operative coaching method
- Online studio practice forum model
- C Model

will be kept in mind when new educators begin to make their own online materials.

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