

Foundation Online or a Foundation on the Line: Moving from Compromise towards Promise

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About the Author:

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Unprecedented Circumstances

“Dear Students,

The course Design Process starts from Monday, 8th June 2020 (online mode). Attached herewith is the Course Abstract. The course will be conducted on Google Classroom, Meet etc. Please accept the invites to the same. Upload your first assignments 1A and 1B by 5 pm given below on Monday, 8th June, 2020.”

This email heralded the beginning of the end; it announced the concluding course of the Foundation year. We were informed that there would be no semester jury, and that our evaluation would be done based on the average grade points of the completed courses.

Our academic year was interrupted just when we had only five weeks of the second semester remaining, and could not think of much else besides coursework and grades. Anticipating the disruption to be temporary, we did not carry any materials back home from our campus. It did not occur to us that we might be forced to shift online entirely; no other normal was imaginable. However, as the pandemic situation worsened and resuming college was not feasible, the institute was compelled to find a way to continue. Amidst flagging hope and heightened worry, the transition from face-to-face to screen-to-screen teaching and learning became inescapable.

Design Process is a pivotal course that requires the utilization of all the knowledge and skills acquire during the entire year. Moreover, it necessitates teamwork, and tests the rapport built with batchmates over months of staying and working together. It is not only the weightage of this course, but also its indispensable application in the designer’s practice which prompt me to emphasize its role in establishing a foundation in the design field.

While we were all anxious about this new situation, going back to the studio was not a possibility in the foreseeable future. This development brought in a new set of challenges. We began to wonder if the virtual mode of learning would help at all. Would the results be worth it? Or would it prove to be a compromise?

A Matter of Perspective

“Dear students,

Design is dynamic and responds to the situation/context. This year we have chosen the overarching area of 'Impact of Covid-19 on various sectors'. You will be learning the Design process through a hands-on experience of following the process while working on one specific theme related to the topic and finding design directions, opportunities and solutions for the theme/concern assigned to your group. The information collection and analysis will be done as a group to get a diverse perspective, whereas the solutions/ideas will be individual. Apart from this, we will have a design process presentation, case study presentations of how design process is used while working on design projects and a reflective assignment at the end of the course.

Best wishes and look forward to meeting you all tomorrow on Google Meet.”

The design studio is more than just a place; it is an experiential space replete with continual social interactions, peer feedback and the proximity of like-minded people to learn from. The affordances of a virtual mode of education are quite different from those of a physical space built exclusively for that purpose. As my batch explored these, it became apparent that there was no substituting the studio; the sudden transition to remote learning introduced various constraints such as lack of materials and resources, limited possibility of cyclical iterations, poor internet connectivity, etc. However, we found that despite these issues, there were opportunities unique to the new medium.

While re-contextualizing these emerging concepts to the broader framework of design studio pedagogy, Derya Yorgancioglu notes:

The changes in the nature of learning experiences and the transmission of knowledge bring forth pedagogical dilemmas: what kinds of knowledge, what kinds of doing, what kinds of creativity are at issue? How will the tacit knowledge embedded in subjective creative endeavor and in inter-subjective communication in the conventional design studio be influenced? What will be effects of new digital platforms (or the new usage patterns of existing digital platforms) and new forms of exchanges on the pedagogy and culture of the design studio? These questions can hardly be answered now, since it will take time to observe the effects of ongoing remote teaching/learning in different contexts, to analyze them in order to unfold their positive and negative aspects for design education. (Yorgancioglu 26)

In this paper, I wish to highlight one such context pertaining to the conversation around the effects of the shift. An emerging view is not one that views it as a paradigm shift: “Online teaching requires far more structure and planning than any of us have had the capacity to provide. This is better considered as crisis management and harm reduction” (Scharmen). I highlight the positive aspects of virtually learning together while being physically distributed across the country, in an attempt to balance the critical narrative with a constructive one. I focus on my experience of Design Process, and inquire: what did this experience teach me?

In the weeks after the course, the pervasiveness of the design process itself was reaffirmed and its utility in diverse scenarios surfaced at the various conferences and webinars that I participated in. It is also a fitting metaphor for the trial basis on which the course was conducted. With the benefit of hindsight, one can analyse what worked well, and what did not. But during those three weeks, all of us had to largely figure it out as we went; this alludes to the fuzziness one experiences in the process before arriving at clarity. Hence, I draw a parallel between the DP course and the design process itself, charting out the various stages that offer the answers to my inquiry.

Define, Ideate, Prototype, Test

The Foundation year had to be completed while the students were spread out across the country, with limited or no access to materials. We were anxious for some sense of direction, some semblance of the rigorous schedules we had followed while working on campus. The erstwhile dependence on physical spaces and face-to-face interactions had us convinced that no online mode would work as effectively. Thus, our faculty also had to counter our

emotional stress caused by the anxiety to perform to true potential from built environments not entirely conducive.

The prototype: a variety of existing tools like Google Meet, WhatsApp, Miro and Google Classroom were employed to connect. While they posed several limitations, they also allowed an overlapping collaborative presence throughout the day and not necessarily within fixed hours. We submitted individual assignments on Classroom and received feedback. The group assignments were done real-time on Miro, and presented to everyone over Meet. Our doubts were clarified by the faculty on WhatsApp groups.

Review, Revise, Modify

Glancing at my notes and reflections of the course tell me that DP was an exercise in improving articulacy and concise presentation skills. Given the fatigue and strain that screens induced, we were urged to carefully time our group presentations and make them visually clear. We created a WhatsApp group for our assigned topic, which ensured that we were all on the same page; this was not always the case on campus, where scattered physical presence would often lead to communication gaps. Physical presence at the studio also proves tiring after a certain duration. Here, we had the constant presence of faculty, who were willing to respond to our queries even at odd hours. They ensured that we were aware of their availability for our support; this reassurance was restricted to the finite working hours of the studio. The round-the-clock, real-time collaboration in the group also helped work one after the other in shifts, according to our mutual convenience.

The data collection phase provided us with a considerably larger sample set and a much wider reach across the country. Research would otherwise have been spatially and temporally restricted to Ahmedabad city during daylight hours. In order to study the ‘Health Impacts of COVID-19’, we were in continuous conversation with our respondents such as health workers and others across professions, age groups, and classes. We might have otherwise been restricted to fewer interviews. Collectively, our primary data was extensive. We then classified and synthesized it on Miro Board, newly introduced to us. We adapted quickly, finding more efficient ways to communicate, like using post-it notes on the real-time workspace to address each other.

Eventually, we identified the main problem areas and worked individually on the one that most resonated with each one of us. We were given the freedom to use whatever materials/software we could, given the circumstances. The assessment was done not only on the basis of the final outcome, but also the overall participation and conceptual clarity demonstrated.

I realized that working together remotely was enjoyable too, with phone calls flying back and forth, Google Meets every so often, and waking up to find yet more ground covered overnight on the common project. Putting up sheets at the end of each assignment, looking at each other’s work and learning from each other after discussions was the culture in studio. My batch took the initiative of uploading its work on a common Google Drive folder to ensure the continuance of peer learning. Some of us also found more time to read books on the Design Process, something which would have been difficult, given our busy schedules on campus. We got the opportunity to improve our soft skills as well as software skills. There was also a visible division of labour and communication within groups, which went on

record; this ensured that everyone put in their best efforts. We must aim to magnify, replicate and enhance these promising aspects in online classes henceforth.

Some improvements could be considered: while we could only receive feedback from designated group faculty and not the entire team, a format which allows this would increase our learnings and insights. Moreover, education on campus included exposure to films, talks and exhibitions. Ensuring that these continue on virtual platforms to stimulate and inspire students would enrich our remote experience. Studio courses are very intensive, and attempting to conduct them in the same way digitally forced us to spend long, tiring hours on a screen; a method easier on the eyes could be explored. While I speak of a collective, generalized experience, it must be noted that not every individual in the batch had the skills, time and resources required for this full-time online course. Some of us felt uncomfortable working with computers, while some faced connectivity issues. The unfortunate reality was that many of us, especially girls, had to simultaneously help with household chores. We must acknowledge individual circumstances and the lack of parity among students in these exceptional times.

Being unable to prototype, except for 3-D modelling and using software posed a huge disadvantage. The possibility of repeating this phase in the studio should be an option.

Finally, the human aspects during a pandemic: feeling lonely, demotivated, anxious about uncertainties, underproductive and distracted must be given adequate attention. Prompt and clear communication of assignments and expectations would ensure a smoother functioning of the course and better overall experiences.

Some questions that remain are: should the quality of the output decide the result of evaluation, or the effort and the process? Given the lack of level playing ground, what metric of evaluation would be fair? How could we replicate some of the advantages of virtual learning across contexts? How might we adapt this format and establish modules based on the current situation for the next batch, including material-based courses? How could we aid them in building a healthy rapport amongst themselves without ever meeting in person?

Conclusions

The importance of reflections has been stressed upon throughout the Foundation year. Taking ownership of my own learning remains an essential take-away of the Programme, and applying oneself eagerly despite circumstances boosts the process.

The Design Process of 2020 might serve as a precedent to the future batches, which would have to deal with the fallout of the pandemic, even as the next academic year begins. The decision to centre it around COVID-19 and its impact helped me psychologically take stock of the situation and understand how it affected various other people. This made me more aware and empathetic. It allowed us to gather and share perspectives among ourselves. I learnt that clearly defining an issue and looking at it from multiple perspectives is equally, if not more important than coming up with solutions. It showed me the beauty of synthesis and what it can achieve.

DP taught me to look at problems as ‘opportunities for intervention’. There are two major post-pandemic routes for design education: (a) moving partially online, or (b) utilizing the

learning of this period once we return to the studios for good. Either way, some possibilities which emerged during this period could serve as a reminder that becoming entrenched in the status quo sometimes prevents us from the very activity we are valued for: innovating. This crisis gave us an opportunity to rethink this. When the pandemic ends, we might go back to the traditional, tried-and-tested culture of workshops and studios. But this interim ‘adaptation’ demonstrates that focusing on the learning outcome more than the method does yield worthwhile results.

The design process is always grounded in context; the solutions which worked while ‘designing’ this particular course might not apply to other courses which are studio-dependent and material heavy. While our seniors often pointed out that we were missing out on the best course and would never experience it the same way they did, a never-say-die attitude did help us achieve something atypical. The example of this pilot can be used to further enhance remote pedagogy, and imagine brighter futures. Futures where the goal is not to forcibly replicate the studio experience or ‘manage to wind up’ the curriculum, but to utilize specificities and situational learning opportunities to their maximum potential.

Works Cited

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