

From Place to Space: Encountering Design Education Online

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Virtual Learning Spaces: Navigating the Chasm

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Bio Note: A passionate multi-disciplinary designer since 1993, Nupur is a practicing designer for the last 27 years, working with a large spectrum of client projects. She graduated from Sir JJ Institute of Applied Arts in Mumbai in 1992 at the top of her batch. Shortly after, she opted to drop out of a Master of Design (MDes) Program at IDC, IIT, Mumbai in 1993. Nupur completed her MFA via e-learning with Savannah College of Art & Design, Savannah USA in 2015 and continues her pursuit in design through her professional practice as well as her association with Srishti Manipal Institute of Art Design & Technology as Program Course Leader for the MA Design Practice in Visual Communication.

Virtual Learning Spaces: Navigating the Chasm

We have been interacting in the digital space through different digital media, communicating in numerous ways across a spectrum of local and global communities for a couple of decades now. Yet, from a professional, institutional and learner/facilitator's perspective, this platform, although an integral part of everyday life, never truly took centre-stage in these scenarios, until the COVID-19 pandemic enforced the lockdown in early 2020. The lockdown situation necessitated new ways of facilitating learning, working and collaborating online.

In the Throes of a Challenge

At Srishti Manipal Institute of Art Design & Technology, Bangalore, India, from a pedagogical perspective, with the enforced lockdown, the platform shifted from on-site to online overnight in response to the call for lockdown brought about in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. Faculty along with students had varying reactions to the online platform ranging from doubt, uncertainty, hopelessness on the one side to hope, persistence, resilience on the other. From the perspective of professional practice, although design projects continue, the demand for traditional requirements in design has experienced a slow-down.

This forced norm to move learning platforms online has allowed time for pause and reflection. The pandemic and the emergent new ways of tackling methods of working, learning and collaborating has been an evolution in the array of solutions that have emerged through shifting perspectives and enabling adaptability. To view it as an opportunity that creates new ways of working with design while addressing real needs – the unusual situation that we find ourselves in now, requires us to make room for good, relevant design thinking

that helps us re-purpose and re-situate what we create along with the processes that we engage in to enable this creative pursuit.

A Trodden Path, Re-defined

E-learning can find its roots in distance learning. The concept of distance learning is not new. It has been around for 180 years and can be traced back to the 1840s when Sir Isaac Pitman, an English educator and the inventor of the shorthand system, first designed a course in learning shorthand through correspondence where he would share learning material with students via the post-office or snail mail as we know it today. Students would complete tasks that were designed in the course and post the material back to him.^{[1], [2]} In the beginning of the 20th century until the 1960s, radio and television were included as mediums of instruction in correspondence courses.^[3] Post this, in the subsequent decades, the introduction to the computer and the internet changed the landscape of learning online. E-learning came into play in a ubiquitous way with the introduction of home computers in the 1980s. By the end of the 1990s and early 2000s, the world wide web saw the rise in the increasing number of online courses being offered. 2002 saw MIT's offering of OpenCourseWare Project that made available to the public its undergraduate and graduate course material online.^[4] Initially, online learning systems were developed to share information with students. With increasing democratisation of the global access and availability of the internet, it became possible to offer interactive educational experiences along with faster time of response and interaction with learners. With established, reputed educational institutes in the U.S.A. creating open access online to some of its coveted lectures and the introduction to learning modules through platforms like Coursera, Udemy, Skillshare and numerous others—helped make learning choices and options accessible to a wide global audience.

A Personal Experience with E-learning

Between 2012 to 2015, after numerous hours of online search, I was able to locate, apply, be accepted and complete a post-graduate program through the fully accredited, intense e-learning program for MFA in Graphic Design with Savannah College of Art & Design, Savannah, USA. Situated in a place rife with personal challenges, this e-learning program offered the opportunity to continue to further my learning in Design while working at the same time. It enabled me to apply the learning in my on-going professional as well as pedagogical practice. It also enabled me to move back and forth seamlessly and include opportunities for field research/work alongside digital work while all the time, navigating the online platform. At the time, Blackboard along with a host of access to sites like the SCAD library and its resources, access to JStor, relevant videos, articles and other supporting material was used to enable and support the online learning journey. Discussions and comments with peers for on-going assignments which were woven in as part of the courses, framed within Blackboard, offered a way to provide relevant feedback and a means to engage in peer to peer and faculty discussions. For me, personally, this aspect played a key role in honing my practice as a design professional and mentor to emerging design practitioners. Participants were offered opportunities to engage and apply themselves meaningfully to the discussion and feedback sessions both on Blackboard as written comments as well as real-time discussions. Participants were encouraged to share a thoughtfully worded constructive feedback. There was a persuasive quality in the way that these interactions were structured and woven into the MFA Program's curriculum requirement. This was supplemented with the constant support of faculty as mentors. It was a convenience to have the information and content material for the courses available to us as learners 24x7 throughout the duration of the course as it allowed the users flexibility of anytime-access given that students were from different time zones.

The scaffolding around which this e-learning program was structured at the time, ensured that students were able to experience the same access to learning opportunities as on-campus students in the best possible way within the online learning environment. The program also offered the option where students could combine the e-learning environment with on-site interactions and various on-site studios if they chose to do so. The e-learning program combination comprising of liberal arts, ways of exploring writing in Design, the combination of Graphic Design courses that included not only the traditional modes of Design but also incorporated contemporary pathways and perspectives, etcetera, had a positive impact and continues to help me shape my journey as a perpetual learner in Design even today. My takeaway from this two-and-a-half-year interaction proved to be invaluable both from the perspective of my professional as well as pedagogical practice.

Real vs Fake Information and Plagiarism

Online learning convenience comes with easy access and availability which in turn opens unique challenges of managing authentic resource material along with the means to prevent plagiarism. While sites like JStor offer an exhaustive repository of legitimate access to credible resource materials on many subjects, the instinctive reaction to go to a Google search or reference Wikipedia when researching topics for professional and pedagogical pursuits often raises questions about the credibility of online resources. The web provides us with wide-access spectrum of information, but often times without the means to validate its source and credibility. However, on the other hand online resources offer access to different media of references like documentary films, archival footage, articles, podcasts and others, through mediums like Vimeo, YouTube, Blogs, Vlogs, Podcasts, access to museums, information libraries online, to name a few. With the availability of easy access to verbal and visual

information online, there is the additional problem of plagiarism which is addressed in the different ways currently through means of academic referencing using MLA Style, Chicago Style, accompanying credit captions for use of images, illustrations, diagrams, hyperlinks, to cite sources in bibliographies, end-credits, acknowledgements, footnotes etc.

Collaboration Online

Opportunities in different ways to engage with online learning have come a long way since it first began in the latter half of the 20th century. It is no longer linear and offers numerous possibilities to creatively work and collaborate collectively to discuss, ideate and iterate peer and mentor sessions. Availability of a vast number of collaborative platforms online like Scribblar, Collaborise Classroom, Twilda, Mural to name a few, offer the means to engage learners actively through tools that mimic an active on-site engagement.

As it so happens with any disruptive innovation, since the time e-learning platforms emerged, opinions about them have largely hovered in the realm of skepticism. The broad discussions about e-learning have drawn comments and concerns about the isolation factors in this method of engaging students. The questions that emerged were – can e-learning engagements be as meaningful as on-site learning? Also, are real working relationships with peers actually possible through e-learning? How does one navigate learning that essentially requires hands-on studio interactions? How does one measure the credibility and validity of this experience along with the learning, mentoring quality for an e-learning interaction – does it hold in good stead for future professional and academic pursuits? While various solutions abound to address these questions, the area of online learning is a continuous process of development and will likely see numerous iterations in its emerging evolutionary timeline.

The Inevitable Inconvenient truth

Access to technology that is required to engage in e-learning is not available to many for a variety of reasons that include unavailability of internet connections in remote areas to unaffordable technological devices for many across the globe. While e-learning platforms offer the convenience of access for learning, there is always an unseen price of this convenience. E-learning involves long hours of engagement online along with storage of data. Millions of kilometers of fibre-optic cables running beneath the earth's ocean floor enables our daily interactions on the world wide web and data storage. A single google search takes the same amount of energy as a standard LED light bulb that is on for three minutes. This does not sound impressive until we take into account the number of individual google searches that we do in a typical day, week, month and year. If we multiply this number by half the world's population—the number is staggering. In fact, by just reading this paper online, or participating in the Webinar for the presentation for about an hour uses the same energy that it would take to keep an LED light bulb on for over five days. The 'cloud' that we use for data storage costs us about 2% of the world's electricity bill, most of it from renewable sources. It emits as much CO₂ as the entire airline industry (this is before the airline industry was grounded due to the pandemic of 2020). The more CO₂ we emit, the higher, warmer and more chaotic our oceans get, which in turn creates a chain reaction of untold consequences around the globe.^[5] While solutions to this need to be addressed, it would be prudent to consider the carbon footprint of online interactions for professional and pedagogical pursuits that have increased considerably due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Making educational choices available while offering options in ways of learning have become a seminal part of the learning/mentoring discourse. Scepticism in routes that deviate from the norm abound and are rife with counter arguments which will hopefully help in

developing ways of learning that are inclusive innovative and experimental, qualities that are the very essence to develop enduring learning as a lifelong pursuit rather than as a phase that comes to an end with the procurement of a degree.

Best Practices in Online Learning

As with any medium of engagement, framing opportunities for effective online learning experiences becomes crucial. With pedagogy as the key focus and using the available opportunities of the medium, these could be a mix of asynchronous and synchronous engagements that might include the following:

- Fostering a supportive community environment
- Setting the norms and parameter of goals and outcome
- Including elements to enable individual as well as peer engagement
- Creating and providing access to a repository of relevant resources
- Creating effective, measurable interactive learning engagements

Shifting Perceptions About Online Learning

When faced with constraints we dip into our innate capacity to adapt and evolve. Lebanese American scholar Nassim Nicholas Taleb's concept of the *anti-fragile* offers us a possible direction to develop new perspectives in the area of virtual working and learning. The concept of anti-fragility describes systems that adapt and evolve in response to shock and disorder as opposed to those that are *resilient* and *robust*, designed to *return to the status quo*.^{[6], [7]} Every pivotal stage in history has always been met with resistance and has given rise to counter resistance which then goes on to become a movement of its own. Ideas and notions are constantly challenged and change with time. Everything is a matter of context. In 12th century Japan, books were deemed to be a dangerous distraction from the Buddhist

practice of being mindfully present.^[8] During the Industrial Revolution, to counter the move to automated systems of manufacturing, William Morris held on to his ideas to propagate his philosophy and practice of hand-made goods. The 2019-2020 pandemic necessitated a drastic shift to the web as a medium of professional and pedagogical practice. Our interaction with online learning is here to stay. Perhaps the post-pandemic period will see the rise of a more inclusive blend of online as well as onsite practice as part of mainstream functioning in both the professional and pedagogical sphere. As human beings we like certainty – this is contradictory, given how uncertain life is. Certainty gives us a sense of comfort and well-being. Yet we have been repeatedly challenged with uncertainties through history and personal experiences. With time, patience, perseverance and our limitless capacity to imagine and adapt, we will continue to discover and create new pathways to navigate our way through this chasm of uncertainty.

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