If you don't have an online presence then you don't exist.
Interview With Jeremy Till, Professor of Architecture, Head of Central Saint Martins and Pro Vice-Chancellor of UAL

Joe Easeman: What sort of online presence do you think the students should be aiming for within the university?

Jeremy Till: As creative, outward looking, innovative people they should be reflecting that, so that clearly a dull, static PDF of their CV is not going to do them, or anyone, any good. I would be surprised if any of our students, by the time they leave, don't have some form of identifiable web presence, which is more than just a Facebook page or a LinkedIn page. I would expect them to be expressing themselves creatively in some form digitally.

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When you are looking around say the degree show here, are you looking for that online presence with the students?

I think if you go round the end of year shows and the students here are giving out cards as they quite often do, its useful to go back to see their website, to remind yourself what they are doing. To set up a website is not rocket science. But to set up a good website is more difficult. So I think there is a big gap between web presence full stop and good web presence. The danger is that it is just as everyone thinks that they are graphic designers because of available technology and fonts, everyone thinks they can be web designers; but not everyone is a web designer. The sense of being intelligent about their web presence is something one does need to learn.

Do you think learning about the online environment is something that could be incorporated into the courses here, or do you think its something students should be finding for themselves?

It is maybe something that should be available to them as learning packages. I don't see it as part of a course, because as soon as you make it part of assessable curriculum it turns into something else. I think that as, for example, an architecture student you should be concentrating on being a great architecture student, and not trying to create a great website. But I would expect that most students should have an identifiable web presence by the time they leave.

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Something that has come up a lot with the academic staff I have been speaking to, and reflecting what you just said, is that there is not enough time to explore that web presence in totality, when they are better concentrating on their work.

You and CLTAD could be giving pointers to the basic packages. There are a number of online open source portfolio packages, for example. Just pointers towards these, and the positives and negatives of each one, how adaptable they are, etc., would be useful information. I once

tried to make my own website and it was a complete disaster, and I tried to learn PHP etc., and it was just a car crash. So then I tried to use a standard package and it looked horrible. So in the end I decided that, well I'm Head of Central Saint Martins, I need a decent web presence, I should employ some graduates, and that's how I got my current website.

My online presence is the website and Twitter. I Tweet a lot.

That's an interesting question. I thought that when I arrived here, someone would tell me to pull in my tweeting because it is very variable and not very corporate. I do do stupid things like taking photos of beaches in Brazil and I do do Tweets glorifying CSM. I wondered whether the purely personal tweets might not be seen as appropriate for someone in my 'dignified' position [laughs], but equally the ones that were purely CSM puff might seem just dull and so people wouldn't follow, so I have a wide variety of Tweets. I have 4000 followers and I guess they follow because of the balance. Sometimes I post quite political things on it. So I use my Twitter as a sort of reflection of what is going on in my head, and my head is a mix of both personal and professional. I do use it publically to talk about CSM, but not in a standard way. If you look at some Vice Chancellor Twitter feeds, it is clear they are written by their press officer; I do my own.

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I don't know. One would have to see how many people unfollowed me for that. My variety of followers is very broad, I would say that maybe a fifth are related to CSM, but the majority, in some form or another, are probably following me for my architectural writing.

Yes, and its important for that. I don't blog that much, but sometimes, if there is something that is really getting to me, then my website has a little blog bit on and Twitter definitely drives people there. If I didn't have Twitter that bit of the website wouldn't be used.

With 4,000 people following, and then retweets, Twitter definitely multiplies hugely the stuff that would otherwise sit quite quietly. I don't believe people have the time to view RSS and follow endless blog sites. I think they might have five years ago, but Twitter has now amplified the debate so much that people's attention span is smaller. I don't think they go trawling through the web. Do you have an RSS

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feed on your computer? Do you follow any particular blog sites?

I have to say that most of what I find is through Facebook, but I agree with what you are saying. I think its is similar with video, people will watch a video that is 2 minutes long, but not 10 minutes, and I think its the same, people will read a Tweet that may direct them somewhere, but not a whole blog.

I think they do read blog post, but they are not reading them in a systematic manner. So its not as if someone is sitting down on Monday morning, and thinking 'I must go to Jeremy's blog site, Frances Corner's blog site, Chris Wainwright's and Natalie's' - people just don't do that.

And do you think that is maybe just because there is just so much out there now that they maybe just need pointing?

Yes.

So I guess that feeds back to what you were saying about students just needing those pointers to develop their online skills?

Yes, and they need to be given a range of opinions and examples, and to use what is available and not try and re-invent it. I mean the websites I've most enjoyed working on are actually the hacked WordPress ones, where you just hack back into WordPress and someone has come up with a new front end for it. But you can still work on the back end.

One of the things we are developing at the moment is a peer run web portal to give students and staff the skills and learning to develop themselves online. What sorts of tools do you think would be useful for that?

I would be very wary about teaching people how to use Facebook, because they will feel patronised. I would be wary of teaching people how to use Twitter because Twitter, as far as I am concerned, depends on a non-mediated form of communication, i.e. 'I have this in my head, I think it's very interesting'. Whereas if you try to teach too many Twitter protocols everyone will end up being the same. I am sure there are corporate companies that have courses on how to use Twitter, and the yes and no, but I think it is probably wrong for a place like this. I do think, as I said before, I think there could be real traction and usefulness in pointing people towards the way in which there presence can be expressed through websites.

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Do you mean by showing people the different ways and letting them do it, or actually teaching them?

Well, both. Firstly, show them there are the different ways. A very basic example: here is a WordPress site, did you know you can change the way it looks, did you know if you paid a little bit more you could have a bit more control over that, did you know if you if you paid a bit more still and learnt to code you could have complete control and form it into a bespoke website? Or take the online portfolio websites and do that as well; then here are the online open source web packages, quick guide to those, how much can you adapt them. And then

up to full coding. Just give the whole range of options, so people can see, and see examples. Rather than try to control it within the university, the university can just act as set of road signs.

Within your industry is a web presence important?

Yes, but it has often been disastrous, because architects thought they could design websites. So many early architecture website were dreadful, loaded with unnecessary Flash, so you just couldn't get into them. I think they are beginning to learn, but architecture websites are not the place to start. They are generally rather over designed and slow, and they don't get the basics.

Related to what you were saying about the tools that are already offered, what in your opinion is the best way of integrating them? Do you think that there needs to be more connectivity between them, or some way of navigating them, that is perhaps more successful than it is at the moment?

Well, at the very basic level, there needs to be quite high up on the intranet and various other portals, a pointer to the various tools within the university. As I said before, I don't think people are even aware of what is available. But also as I said before I don't think the university should be inventing a blogging platform; why would we, who's going to use that, instead of Facebook or another blog platforms? I just don't think that is a very good use of resources. But there are some bits of some of the website that have been developed within UAL for our particular use; I haven't used them, but they look good - I just don't think that people know enough about them.

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So there needs to be more knowledge and understanding. Do you think that is something that could be taught to the staff in order to bring down to the students?

Yes. You probably need some champions, and you do have digital champions in each college. And they would know to a greater or lesser extent what is available.

How important do you think an online presence is for students?

I think it's incredibly important. If you don't have an online presence then you don't exist.