

There are a lot of things out there that remains latent, remains as potential, because people haven't figured out interesting things to do with them.

Interview with Jeff Dennis, Senior Academic Lecturer for BA Fine Art at Chelsea.

Joe Easeman: Our last project looked at the understanding of developing an online presence with different communities at the university. What is your view of developing an online identity or presence?

Jeff Dennis: I suppose, when this sort of question is raised, you start to think about who you are, and what your experience of these things is. And I suppose I should say something about my own history of these things [online resources]. In some ways I bear the scars of some encounters with attempts by various institutions to introduce communities, and way, way back, I was volunteered to introduce blackboard, which was University of the Arts first embodiment of the virtual learning community. I could see, even though my own practice is really not digital at all, I could see the advantages of having certain kinds of things. The certain kinds of things that you would traditionally put on a notice board, or expect students to come into an office to ask about, or collect a form for, you could put all of them on a computer platform and they would be much more accessible. But it was really an uphill struggle to try and interest other staff in using things in that way, and if you couldn't get the staff to make it part of their course structure then you couldn't expect the students to be at all interested in using it. So it was almost a dead duck from the start, until a few years later in become almost imposed from the top down and everyone just accepted it, it was there. It perhaps wasn't very good, or very friendly, but people just used it like you would a noticeboard or something, so I suppose from that I'm wary of institutions attempts to invent or impose or build their own ideas of what online communities suit students. I think students, particularly art students are naturally sceptical of institutional structures or they simply find something outside of that structure that does what they want more quickly, or easily, or in a more user friendly way. So they start to use that instead, they find a way, or ways, around whatever 'official' thing you set up. Which is rather brilliant in a way, but it can also mean that a lot of people quite frankly waste a lot of time. For example with Moodle at the moment, there are wonderful aspects to Moodle, and if you used it to its maximum it could be a very powerful tool, you can make a blog on it, you can have an online e-portfolio system, there something called workflow. I don't want to sound too sceptical about these things, its great they are there and available, but sometimes it is seen as some sort of institutional package, which makes it in itself, less amenable to students, and seems like someone else is in control of it all the time.

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I remember when I was studying BAFA at Chelsea, your tutor group, which I myself wasn't part of, was encouraged to set up their own blogs, I understand that is now a general part of the course structure that is introduced in the first year.

Yes, and that's generally works very unproblematically, in that you can immediately see the chronological development in the students' work and you can track back what they did before. It's all there for them to look back on and reflect, and its stays there, so they

can cut and paste things, and enhance things they have put on their blog before and develop them in the form of essays, in the form of portfolio project proposal, or just part

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of their extended memory of their own work and developments they have made in the past. So I’m very keen on that, although I do know that some students think it is a replacement for something not digital, like a note book or a sketchbook or something like that. And I have to work quite hard on say, ‘no, that’s ok; it’s not trying to take the place of those things. You can

documents your photographs, you can document your notes from your notepads, your scribbles on the back of an envelope, and you can put that on your blog if that works for you.’ it’s just a way of preserving things in a stream.

Is that something that has been recently introduced? One of the things that came up at the Chelsea community was that, when it was taught as part of the course integration, students were more likely to input into a blog chronologically, but if it was just something that students were encouraged to produce as part of their research then they tended to do it all in the last few weeks and change the dates on the blog. Do you find now, with it being introduced to the students in first year, as a course integrated subject, that students are more likely to develop it throughout the course, alongside their work, as appose to seeing it as a requirement?

Well different tutors have different approaches to this. I have been keen to say ‘look this is accessed as part of the course, it is a formal requirement, but if I was you I would try and keep this going and no one has to see it if you don’t want them to see it, it can be a kind of online lock up of your thoughts, and your developing work, and you can reflect back on it.’ I think it can be useful to keep it ticking over, even if it’s not a major part of your work. It doesn’t mean to say that you are a particular kind of artist, a digital artist or anything; it’s really just a tool. So I try and down play it as much as possible and say it really is there for you, there’s no need to get anxiously about it, or make a fuss about it, it may be life changing for you, or it might be simply useful.

I suppose it’s like introducing to say an A level student that a sketchbook isn’t just for part of your final grade, it’s for your own personal development.

Do you find that students on your course are quite capable of setting up websites or other online identities?

I think so, well, again I must be wary of someone of my generation pretending to have an overview of the happening situation now of someone in their 20’s, but I can see that most of them are comfortable with most forms of social media and this forms an increasing role in the way they communicate with each other. It was quite interesting, the other day I asked a first year student how much they use email, and he almost laughed at me, as if it’s like saying whether you use semaphore of something. It instantly became clear that for a certain generation email has become something that is OK for

institutional purposes and formal kind of things, but it's not a way that they communicate with each other. I think that many people of my generation haven't grasped that. Email is still this massive tool that consumes their working week, and they should maybe condense that. It is seen as a requirement, and it is a way of getting certain kinds of information across, it's never going to be any more of a dynamic thing that enables something new to happen.

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I'm wary too of people who get excited over any one particular platform, thinking they can use something like Facebook, or some other social media platform in order to unlock some great new creative potential. I mean some artists have explored these things for their own sake, and they make work about how these things change the ways we communicate with each other, and how a virtual identity can become more real than an offline identity. But I think that for most people, you have got to see that it is out there, and it's a way to keep in touch with one another, but I would be very wary of become evangelical about it, believing that it is going to unlock some great creative potential.

I think that short term, I can see it being very useful to create a coherent group around a project. A Facebook group might be a quick way to create an online meeting space for people to some short term ends, a project that has got to happen, in a similar way to people who have got to organize a party or something. I think it is clearly great for that. I am wondering how long that lasts, and whether it become obsolete after a while. Whether people set up groups and they contribute to the Facebook group, for example, for a certain period of time and then it's left to whither. And I think a similar thing happened with blogs, that they have a kind of, radioactive half-life, and then they wither away, and don't get used anymore, they are probably still out there somewhere but no one looks at them anymore.

Within the art industry how important is social media, and your social media presence?

It can be exciting and can offer a potential, but it can also have a downside to it. If you set up a webpage as an artist then you have got to take responsibility for it, and it has got to be something that you think clearly represents you, it can become a bit of a nightmare I think. If you've got something up there that's out of date, or just the way you've put it together, the style, etc. it can do you a disservice. You can realize that this is not what you want to project of yourself as an artist. [And I suppose if you ever you to change the perception of yourself as an artist, then it's very hard, because these things are already in place?] Well that's a very interesting question; because I suppose that it enable you to do that. You could write your current webpage for example, and put up something completely different. You could reinvent yourself in that way. [Are you still worried that the images will still be there somewhere?] I think everyone has to take that on board now. I think you have to assume that it's all out there forever.

Do you think some learning about navigating yourself online could be integrated into the course? Do you think the online environment is an important enough space to warrant that sort of knowledge?

I think this is a really interesting question, but I am at the limits of my competence to comment on this. I certainly wouldn't think it's my role to further stir the anxiety that people may already have about their online identities or how their projected on the web, and through social media. I see my role as more to calm those anxieties and to rebalance where people attention is and what they are thinking about when they come into a course like this and how they are thinking about their own work. I don't want them to be day-to-day worrying about whether they have the right online identity. Having said

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all that I think as we said with the project blogs, and with Facebook groups, for short term projects, I think all of those are just really useful things, and I'm happy to encourage their use if students are comfortable with using those things themselves. I'm a great joiner in, rather than an innovator in these things, and I often depend on students telling me about things on the web and how they use it, and I credit myself on being quite quick on

the uptake on the potential of these things, thinking 'well if you can do that, then you could do this thing on it as well, and you could make contact with these people, etc.' [so there is a sort of cross level learning then]

Would you say it was vital for the student to have knowledge of how to develop themselves online in terms of skills such as coding etc.?

What any student needs both digitally and in every other aspect of their work, and thought, is going to vary from person to person. It might be right for one person to get deeply involved in coding for example, but it might be a waste of time for another. I would be very reluctant to prescribe. We all only have a limited amount of time to try and develop work, so you have to quickly become an expert in where to spend your energies.

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What is your online presence?

It [my online presence] consists of not very much really. Having set up a web page just to make it easy for people to contact me if they were interested in my work, which are painting, which are not digital, I set something up some years ago, and then had to keep tweaking it and re-doing it and re-designing. But I've tried to pare it down to a minimum presence that I don't have to constantly think about, or else I wouldn't have any time to do anything else, to think about paintings.

So do you use it mostly for networking and a portfolio?

Yes, as a communication tool, with people who have somehow seen my work, or got to hear about my work and want to get in touch with me, and they seem to do it through the site first. As far as that's concerned, it works, and I am not making any larger claim than that.

The Fine Art industry is hard to define as one thing, where as in other industries it's very clear to say, 'this is what it's about', in fine art every genre, from painting to video etc. is so different. Is it important to have an online presence?

I think you'll have it one way or another. If you have any online presence at all, you'll have an online presence that you will have somehow made yourself or would have been choreographed for you. I think that is an interesting situation, and perhaps an interesting proposal for a future online identity for an artist, that they create a sort of ripple around themselves, instead of trying to kind of control it directly themselves, by creating a webpage or spending all of their time on Facebook, or something. They do something that is intrinsically interesting, and people create a kind of digital ripple around that work, or presence.

I think that's a really interesting concept. Coming from my practice in participation and performance art this is always something that we are trying to create, to get people to take photos and videos and share, it is about this ripple of identity.

Are you worried about misrepresentation online? What with the online environment being so much about sharing and re-appropriation, do you find that there is a fear of misinterpretation or misrepresentation?

I think that's always there, and would be there even if we weren't talking about the digital world. You cannot completely control and dictate how you are going to be interpreted as an artist by other people. and if you get over anxious about that then it will stop you spending your energy in the most interesting and fruitful way, because you will constantly be trying to control how people interpret your work. This is a whole area that is interesting. Artist are often seen as control freaks, and constantly trying to steer how their work is written about, how their work is curated, what context they're work is seen in, and it is seen as perhaps an extension of professionalism, but I think that can lead to a kind of negative anxiety.

I think it's just increased a lot recently, because before, where you had the potential of someone being written about that a small group of people would see; now you have the potential of any number of people seeing it.

Yeah, although, if I may take your comment in a slightly different direction, I think this concept of the small group is interesting, and one thing that digital interaction does let you do is to create a small group amongst strangers, so you can collaborate with people who are a long way away. There is a sort of global local thing that is quite exciting and interesting. Online interaction enables you to have, and I'm using this word with caution, a sort of professional intimacy with co-workers, and collaborators, that would be perhaps a lot more difficult without that web of interaction.

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Your communities that you have been working on through the 'communities of practice' project, 'Paint Club', does that have an online presence?

Yes, it has a webpage that acts as an archive, so people can get a flavour of past events, and there is as much as possible that is document online, and you can watch

conferences and discussions that's happened in the past. It operates as a sort of digital noticeboard as well, to involve people in future events and let people know what is happening. It also has a Facebook group. I often find that some people come to it through the web page, some people come to it through word of mouth, some people like it on Facebook, other people watch the twitter feed. I think people are comfortable with different forms and all you can do is try and accommodate these different forms and know that some of them are going to work for some people some of the time.

Do you have different communities within that? Are there some people who will come to the event and not interact online, and some people who will only interact online and not come to events, etc.?

Yes absolutely, and I think that is a really important point. Some people just don't look on the webpage at all and only know it as a Facebook page, some people don't know any of that, and like it as something where people talk together in a space, in the pub or at the Tate, and they need a word of mouth nudge that something is happening, other people just like getting the email out and joining in that way. So it's dangerous to become evangelical about one platform or one way of communicating I think, you miss out on a lot that way. It is easy to become annoyed with people when they say 'well, I didn't know' and you say 'well it's been on the web page for months', but for some reason they just don't look at that and are waiting for something else to happen, for someone to tell them,

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or for a letter to arrive through the post, or a flyer to be left in the studio. It's amazing how good the low tech stuff is, how much more effective these can be sometimes, rather than the outcome of hours and hours of trying to put them into some sort of digital form.

I suppose it about that sort of personal interaction that you don't get online

Yeah, I think we are all kind of blind or deaf in certain ways and we only pick up on certain channels of information. So maybe we have to shut down a bit to certain things. You know some people will get way too many emails and if they replied to all of them it would use up all of their lives.

What sort of tools would be useful for the students?

I think the best tools would be sort of things that the students find for themselves, and then you can adapt them, or accommodate them with your own interactions with the students. If you've invented something you may think is phenomenally useful and inventive, and that nobody has used before, but the more you try and force people to use it the more resistance people become to it, they'll say 'no, I don't want to use that, I want to use this instead'. Having said that, I think we have moved a long way and things like the communities of practice and things the process.arts have enormous potential.

You mentioned workflow earlier; you said it wasn't very widely used with your students?

Well that maybe too dismissive, because I don't actually understand it myself. I think the best thing, probably to get those things launched is to give them to the students and ask the students to see what the potential of them was, and then get the student to teach the staff how to use it [you mean in a project context?] Well saying 'there's this thing we've

got, you see what you can do with it, we will pay you a little bit of money to spend a bit of time playing with this, to see what it is capable of, and then come back and feedback to the staff', and then the staff will get excited about it and feedback to the students. So you get a sort of circular or spiral flow of interaction. I think there is a lot of latency with these things, aspects of Moodle and workflow are set up by very clever people in rooms, and they remain there, at the top of the toolbar, for years, and nobody amongst the staff has time to go, what is this. But if they could be shown the potential of it, and perhaps if the students were using it already then suddenly it would be more accessible. Much like when you come into this canteen at a busy time of day there would be more mac PowerBooks than you can shake a stick at, extremely powerful things that used to be known as super computers, and there export used to be limited by the United States government, because they were considered too dangerous to be let into the wrong hands, because of course most people are using them for, maybe a bit of Photoshop or such like, but mostly Facebook etc. so here they are, these amazingly powerful machines, and they are not being used to their full potential. There are a lot of things out there that remains latent, remains as potential, because people haven't figured out interesting things to do with them, that aren't immediately relevant or what they are trying to do on the course or on the project.