

# Studio Practice

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## INTRODUCTION

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Studio practice – the teaching of practical work – more often than not, the largest part of a student’s timetabled commitment on most courses. Yet what does ‘studio practice’ mean? Is it intended as free time for students to work at their own pace on their own choice of project? Or is it intended to be directed time, allocated to specific tasks?

Is it staffed or are tutors ensconced in the office undertaking administrative duties but ‘available’ should any student need help?

The answer to these questions is, of course, that it depends... but because of its generally unstructured nature, studio practice is often the part of a course in which part time tutors are engaged the most. With that in mind, let’s jump straight in to the case study before trying to unpick what’s happening and suggesting some ways of improving the situation.

# Case Study

Read the following case study and, as you do so, try to answer the following questions:

- 1 The first few paragraphs may reflect your own experiences. Teaching by 'floating around' is also known to as 'studio cruising'. What problems do you think can be associated with this?
- 2 The phrases 'I'm a successful artist and you're lucky I'm talking to you' and 'guru teaching' are interesting. Do you think being in the presence of a successful artist/designer is enough for students, or do you think there's more to teaching?
- 3 How do you know if a student is 'patently struggling'? What type of student is most likely to seek your input? How might you ensure that your time is not monopolised?
- 4 We all gravitate unconsciously towards particular types of people – it's entirely natural. You can't get on with everyone. Students who smile or look happy might get more of our attention than those who look angry and distant. What strategies could you use to either make sure you don't favour some students over others, or to make talking to more 'difficult' students less of a challenge?
- 5 Have you ever had difficulty reconciling your personal tastes with objective assessment criteria? How might you use students to help you in the evaluation process?
- 6 Do you know how to tackle any personal issues that come up with students? How would you cope with a student who has had an emotional upset recently?

I taught fine art part-time for 15 years. I taught part-time all over the place. The biggest thing that sticks in my mind is not knowing where to hang my coat and people being too busy to tell me what to do. I was meant to teach just by floating around.

Sometimes we had lists of people to see but often not. Discovering from scratch about the students each time – it sometimes annoyed the students themselves as well, that I didn't know the background. Later my strategies changed – one place I was at we had the practice of group crits with a group of staff, and students would be physically ill. I think it's a million times better now, and staff understand that it's not just about "I'm a successful artist and you're lucky I'm talking to you."

My first day ever teaching, the course leader opened the door and said "Look boys, I've got a present for you!" I could have died... For someone new the hardest things are the practical issues – where to get your contract, where to have lunch. I would like new tutors to see a copy of files so they understand the work and the context. At the beginning when students don't have much experience of group discussion I have to facilitate the group process. I might see them individually once a semester. By the final semester I don't have to say very much – just act as a group member myself.

It used to be "guru" teaching, I often had a space in a room of students and they were doing their own thing. We see it now as facilitating learning, rather than imparting knowledge – we teach them how to find out themselves.

If someone is patently struggling I have a one-to-one session and ask if anything's the matter. But if they're just not showing much ability there's always some medium that would suit them, such as traditional painting, which doesn't require traditional craft skills. For assessments it's important to look at the criteria and the marking scheme to keep it objective. Our own preferences might be subjective, the marking criteria ensure the actual assessment is objective.

Ninety-nine percent of students' work is about themselves and how they see the world, so inevitably issues about their personal life come out. Sometimes I've felt very inadequate – there have been issues to curl your hair. Sometimes I just listen, there's often not much you can do except listen. Sometimes I'll suggest they contact the counselling service. I've also gone in to see students without being given a background.

# Follow Up Notes

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1

Studio cruising and crits have come in for a lot of criticism in recent research. Read 'Uncovering problematics in design education – learning and the design entity' by Allan Davies and Anna Reid (see further reading) for more information on the problems associated with floating tutors.

2

This might be a useful opportunity to consider the question 'does being a good artist/designer make you a good teacher?' and think about "what does make a good teacher?" Think about your own experiences of good and bad teaching, and about any complaints you had as a student.

3

If you are working through this section in a group, try producing 'pen portraits' of typical student types and then share suggestions for dealing with them. Try to see beyond 'one to one' as the 'ideal' teaching mode and bear in mind the value of group discussion – particularly informal, impromptu groups (see Davies and Reid above for more on the shortcomings of 1:1 teaching – many people remain convinced it is essential).

4

This can be an uncomfortable question to think about, as nobody likes to admit to favouritism. But remember that we are concerned here with unconscious favouritism, not deliberate.

Think about a group you teach and see if you can identify one or two students you rarely talk to. Consider (hypothetically) for a moment that it isn't because the student is being 'difficult', but that they find you unapproachable. Trying to see things from the students' point of view (even if you disagree with it) can be useful.

5

Assessment can be approached as a collegiate, group activity. Creating a discussion of student work can lead to a situation in which grades appear to be 'negotiated' (in fact they are kept to the criteria) and in which judgements are open and able to be challenged. Small group crits/discussions are far more valuable than the traditional whole-class crit.

6

You might find it helpful to meet with counselling and support staff to ask for their preferences. Remember that different institutions have different policies (some, for example, make it clear that academic staff should not get involved in personal issues while others make pastoral guidance part of the job description).

# Discussion

The case study above identifies several problems with studio practice. Firstly, it tends not to have any aims; secondly the way it is timetabled often means that different staff see students each time.

But in the past, these two 'issues' have been seen as positives. To explore this apparent contradiction, use the table below to brainstorm as many positives and negatives as you can. It may be useful to think in turn from the point of view of the student, the member of staff, and of colleagues who may have seen the student earlier or later. It may also help if you look at each positive and try to turn it into a negative – and vice versa.

POSITIVES	NEGATIVES

## Studio Practice

Among the positives you may have identified 'lack of constraints on creativity' or something similar for the student, and 'a range of advice'; while for staff you may believe the unstructured approach described in the case study means that they get to see all the students, and to focus on those who need the most help.

But what about the negatives? These include 'contradictory advice' for students, a lack of time to build relationships between staff and students, and an inconsistency in the amount of contact time. For staff, negatives include having to start from scratch each time, lack of depth in the professional relationship you build up with students and, as mentioned above, attention concentrating on the same students all the time.

# Top tips for Studio Practice

1

## **KEEP YOUR DISCUSSIONS WITH STUDENTS FOCUSED ON THE LEARNING OUTCOMES**

Evidence from research shows that students believe they will be marked down if they fail to follow your advice, and become overwhelmed by the plethora of contradictory advice about things that actually aren't involved in the assessment. Don't take this too literally, of course, but make sure students know the difference between advice that is related to the assessment criteria, and additional advice that goes beyond the intended learning outcomes and assessment criteria. It isn't unknown for a well-meaning tutor to comment, say, on a student's choice of typeface for their presentation board only to find that the student has spent all her time getting that one thing right even though it isn't going to be assessed – and then being upset when they aren't rewarded for following the advice. (Equally, if you are involved in assessment, make sure you evaluate the students' learning outcomes rather than things that aren't part of the assessment criteria. You can still comment on other things in the feedback, of course.)

2

## **READ THE MODULE/UNIT DESCRIPTION BEFOREHAND**

It isn't uncommon for students to translate 'tell me what you're doing' as 'I don't know why I'm here' – it destroys any prestige you might have! Ideally you should be fully briefed by the course/module leader beforehand.

3

## **PLAN, PLAN, PLAN**

Even 'unstructured' sessions need at least one aim or outcome. Even if it's 'evaluate students' progress in [learning outcome X]' then you will find your discussions with students much more productive. Don't see this as a constraint as there's always room for 'any other business' afterwards. This way you can ensure that all students get at least the same 'threshold' of support.

#### **MAKE APPOINTMENTS**

Tell students you'll see them in groups and put a sign-up sheet up in the studio (flip-chart size is best, along with a marker). This way, students know when they will be seeing you – the alternative is that they will drift off and you will find yourself either standing around with nothing to do, or talking incessantly to the same student.

4

#### **KEEP TO TIME**

Under no circumstances run over time – you will never catch up, and it annoys students who have other pressing demands on their time (jobs, children etc). It's also just rude to keep students waiting for you. If a conversation needs extra time, make a time to resume later and always keep one or two slots free during the day for this purpose. Add buffer time to appointments as well, but try not to use it unless you have to.

5

#### **INTRODUCE THE SESSION**

A busy studio tends to be more productive than one in which the only occupants are you and the students you're talking to. If you are able to make studio practice a 'lesson' and set objectives for the students to have achieved by the end, then those who aren't talking to you will be more likely to turn up and stay in the studio.

6

#### **DON'T LEAVE THE ROOM**

If students can't see you they may assume you're not there and drift off. If a group doesn't turn up, stay in the studio. But make sure you take breaks.

7

#### **TURN OFF YOUR MOBILE PHONE**

It's often students' number one complaint: tutors whose phones keep going and, worse, who take calls. Never answer the phone when talking to a student – they are your client now.

8

#### **MAKE NOTES**

Make notes either as you talk to students or straight after. Identify common issues or points and either sum them up on a flipchart or on a sheet that can be copied and put in pigeon holes. Keep all your notes in a folder and give copies to the course leader. Highlight anything that comes up that you feel colleagues need to know about.

9

# 10

## **TRY TO AVOID BEING ONE OF MANY TUTORS**

There's no real value in students getting lots of contradictory advice, nor satisfaction in you not seeing a project through from start to finish. Try to influence the situation: a large group can be broken down in to smaller groups and you could be responsible for just a few students for longer, rather than lots of students for short periods.

# 11

## **BE DIFFERENT EACH SESSION**

If you hold group tutorials one session, start the next with a peer evaluation (see box below), and another with a Q&A. Consider starting a session by reviewing your thoughts from the previous one.

# 12

## **DON'T DO LARGE GROUP CRITS**

A lot of research evidence (see below) shows that the traditional crit is not an effective learning tool, and it's boring. Resist the urge to be the centre of attention.

### Peer evaluation kick-off for studio practice

The following technique can be a fun way to start a session but, more importantly, a useful way of highlighting any issues that students have which may not come out in normal tutor-student discussions.

Get students into small groups and ask them to take it in turns to discuss their work. Make sure the learning outcomes are clearly displayed so that conversations remain focussed on those. Consider making just one or two of them central to the discussion. Ask the group to make notes on what each student says and the conversations that follow.

Then get each student to write down bullet points about what they said, and what the responses were from their peers.

You can use these sheets to guide your own tutorials, plus doing this allows you to spend 40 minutes or more wandering around getting a feel for the general progress of the group, and to join in any conversations. Students will be used to working in this way from school – so don't be afraid to use methods with which they are familiar.

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#### FURTHER READING

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You may wish to get hold of a copy of 'Uncovering problematics in design education – learning and the design entity' by Allan Davies and Anna Reid

(<http://www.arts.ac.uk/cltad/resea/papers/Designededucation.pdf>)

and look at the key findings of 'Critical Distance' research undertaken at Surrey Institute of Art and Design, University College into problems with the traditional crit.

(<http://www.bton.ac.uk/adc-ltsn/html/projects/report-CriticalDistance.htm>)