

Teaching Illustration through Synchronous Online Studio during COVID-19: Reflections and Best Practices

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Innovative Strategy and Purpose

The COVID-19 pandemic necessitated a sudden transition to the online modality in higher education during 2019. While lecture courses have seen a more gradual shift to distance and hybrid modalities in the past, instructors and students of design studios were challenged to more abruptly adapt to the remote modality of teaching and learning (Ceylan et al., 2020; Fallatah, 2020). During the pandemic, some of the key challenges that students in online studio courses faced included technical issues, grade distribution changes, and modifications to project types (Fallatah, 2020). However, they also experienced benefits pertaining to the use of digital tools and increased work efficiency (Ceylan et al., 2020), availability of more time to complete assignments, reduced costs such as printing, and enhancements in learning outcomes (Fallatah, 2020). Given the mixed nature of the online experience, many students indicated a clear preference for blended/hybrid modalities of teaching (Alqahtani & Rajkhan, 2020; Fallatah, 2020). During the pandemic, faculty were also faced with the choice between synchronous and asynchronous online modalities. Prior research has suggested that synchronous tools should be adopted based on considerations of relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, and risk; with the synchronous modality being valuable for group interactions (Tabak & Rampal, 2014). In fact, strategies that combine synchronous and asynchronous components allow students to derive the benefits of both modalities (Chen et al., 2020), and may be suited for continuation even after the pandemic. This paper shares best practices and reflections in teaching a fashion illustration design studio course employing an online synchronous modality with integrated asynchronous components and discusses post-pandemic plans for continuation.

Implementation

Technology and Remote Teaching Aids

Synchronous studio teaching was seamlessly facilitated through the use of Canvas as the virtual platform for this course with respect to the following: 1) course administration (syllabus, announcements, emails, Zoom, and Panopto recording integrations); 2) course instruction (learning modules); and 3) course assessment (gradebook, markup of projects and assignments, attendance, and rubrics). Synchronous class for this course took place over Zoom, a cloud-based platform for video and audio conferencing, chat, and collaboration. In addition to signing in from their laptops, students also signed to Zoom using their mobile phones. This allowed students to focus their



Figure 1 HAIFT Brand Adjustable Tripod

phone camera on their work (sketch) and the laptop to their face, depending on the context of interaction. A grant from the university's teaching center allowed the purchase of tripod stands for all students so that they could direct their phone camera to their work when sketching/rendering (see Fig. 1). In addition to Canvas and Zoom, students also installed and used the Adobe Scan app that converts the phone into a portable PDF scanner, facilitating easy scanning of their work into a PDF and direct submission of assignments and projects through the Canvas app installed on their phones.

Learning Modules

The content for the course was structured into bi-weekly learning modules integrating class agendas, lectures, pre-recorded demonstrations by the instructor, participations, assignments, and projects. Asynchronous videos for viewing before class on topics such as line weight, buying markers, and others were included in the learning modules. Students viewed these videos before class so that they had background information on each class topic.

Synchronous Lectures and Pre-recorded Guided Demonstrations

Instructor lectures and pre-recorded demonstrations took place synchronously during class. This approach was preferred over the flipped classroom since the average duration of a demonstration was over 30 minutes and students often did not know when to stop a video to carry out parallel steps. Synchronous viewing of the demonstrations addressed this problem, such that the recording was paused periodically by the instructor so that students could follow along with the demonstration. This also allowed the instructor to make corrections to work-in-progress rather than the completed sketches. Students submitted the completed in-class assignments via Adobe Scan and Canvas promptly after the demonstration, allowing for the instructor's instant digital markup using an Apple pencil with the Canvas app on the iPad (see Fig. 2). The instructor also scheduled individual breakouts with students who needed extra help through live-streamed instructor markup.

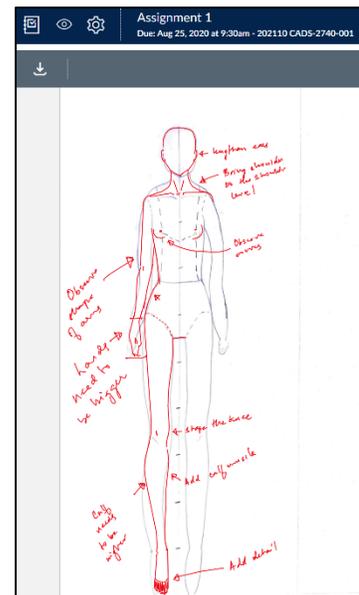


Figure 2 Instructor's Digital Markup

Synchronous Peer Interactions

To facilitate peer-to-peer interaction, the class was split into pre-determined (based on shared interest in apparel design) small breakout groups of four students. On completion of the synchronous lecture and demonstration, students were assigned to their small groups so that they could interact with their peers as they worked on their in-class assignments and projects, creating a learning atmosphere that is similar to an illustration studio. They could view and comment on each other's work and share strategies without feeling overwhelmed in a larger class. The instructor moved virtually from group to group trouble-shooting and providing feedback.

Effectiveness and Plans for Continuation

The above strategy was highly successful and feedback received from students' end-of-term evaluations was overwhelmingly positive. Students greatly appreciated the synchronous online studio and shared comments such as “*the best virtual environment for something so hands-on and involved.*” Based on feedback, components such as the pre-recorded guided demonstrations and instant digital markup will be carried forward into the post-pandemic physical studio. The former allows for repeated viewing of the demonstrations as needed by students, whereas, the latter allows students to instantly access the corrections on their assignments digitally at any time, thus facilitating improved learning outcomes irrespective of modality.

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