

## S01:E11 Charlie Smith

Studio Design Tutor / Lecturer in Architecture; School of Art and Design; Liverpool John Moores University; United Kingdom.

Interviewed by Sandra Abegglen, August 2020

*Thanks for agreeing to participate in our expert Voice series for the TALON project. Please tell us a little bit about the work you do, what you're involved in recently and what your specialties are.*

Thank you, Sandra. It's a pleasure to be a part of the series. I teach undergraduate and postgraduate architecture programmes in the School of Art and Design at Liverpool John Moores University (JMU). I also teach the postgraduate MA course on Urban Design. I am Reader of Creative Pedagogies in the school, and most of my research focuses on teaching and learning in creative programmes. In particular, I am looking at assessment and feedback, and how all of these different issues affect the student experience. I also do a bit of research into library design, library architecture and learning space design. I've been at JMU for about 15 years, and before that I worked in professional practice for architects in Manchester in the north of England. Primarily, I was designing school buildings there. So I've gone from designing for education into researching for education.

*Sounds very interesting and, these days, very relevant. How have you experienced the move to remote teaching and learning?*

I think, like a lot of institutions in the UK, we had quite a rapid transition from face-to-face teaching to online teaching. For us it all happened over the space of a weekend. At the end of one week, we were teaching face-to-face, and then from the start of the following week, we were teaching exclusively online.

In architecture, like a lot of art and design programmes, the design studio is the focal point of teaching and learning. Studio culture is very much at the heart of the student learning experience. In that sense, we're very much aligned with a socio-constructivist approach to learning, where in the studio, through tutorials and design reviews, learning is very much co-constructed between students and students, and students and teachers. It is all driven by the dialogue that takes place, because we teach primarily through one-to-one tutorials. Over the course of one of our studio days, I might have 12 one-to-one conversations, about half-an-hour each, with students about their ongoing design projects. So a lot of our teaching is formative feedback on their evolving design projects. That dialogue, as Susan Orr and Alison Shreeve described it, is the glue that holds the art and design learning environment together. For us, when we made the transition to online learning, one of the biggest challenges was how to maintain that dialogue-driven teaching approach.

This kind of technology is great - we're on different continents and we can sit and have this conversation, and dialogue without one of us taking two long-haul flights with all of the cost and the time and the carbon emissions that would accrue through that. But I think that whenever you're having a dialogue in this kind of format, there are nuances and aspects of the conversation which just aren't quite the same as they would be if we were talking face-to-face. So I think, for us, we had to be quite mindful in that move from

teaching face-to-face in the studio to teaching online, in how we try to maintain and work with that dialogue-driven learning approach, which is so fundamental to the studio education.

*How did the students react to that move? Did they miss seeing you and having that direct contact?*

I think the students understood quite clearly why this had happened, and they were generally very willing to engage and very supportive of what was happening. It was about the middle of March that we went from face-to-face teaching to online and we still had several months of the academic year to go, so a colleague of mine very quickly did an appraisal of different online learning environments that we could use. We settled on **Zoom** quite quickly because it's very intuitive and easy to use and both students and tutors could screen share very easily. Once we made that decision, we used it continuously because once we'd set a process up, we were quite keen to try and maintain that same process throughout the rest of the semester.

We quickly made the transfer and we managed to maintain the tutorial process pretty effectively in terms of recreating the one-to-one conversation that studio teaching is synonymous with. We'd use our virtual learning environment, which for us is **Canvas**, and the students would upload their drawings the day before and then, as a tutor, I'd download all of their drawings in the morning. Just in the same way as in the studio I'd have a series of maybe 12 half-hour conversations, I would now have 12 half-hour Zoom calls with each student. I would bring up their work on the screen and they'd talk to me in the usual way, tell me about the ideas that they were having and the direction they were taking their project work in. The great thing was that I could then annotate their drawings and we could draw over it and discuss it, in just the same way as we would in studio. At the end of that process, I would re-upload that work back to the virtual learning environment. So then they had a record of that conversation, in just the same way that, in studio, we might be drawing over their drawings and then they could then take them away with them at the end of the session as a record of that conversation and that formative input on their work. We tried to mirror as closely as possible what would happen in studio. Design learning is very much an experiential process. It's all about testing ideas.

One limit that we had was that we work quite often with physical models. Students will make scale models of their work and when you're in studio, you can pick those up, turn them around and look into them. That was a more difficult aspect to replicate. Students might still make cardboard models and upload their photographs, but it perhaps wasn't quite the same as it would be in the traditional in-studio environment.

*What would you say were the opportunities to newly emerge through that? Did you experience any particularly positive developments?*

I think the move to online learning is something of a catalyst for the adoption of technologies that were already there, but perhaps we weren't really adopting them yet in a big way. The process was perhaps quite reactive in that we were responding to the situation by moving to online teaching, but there are opportunities to be more proactive going forward, and using the best of those techniques.

For instance, we have **Panopto** as a way of recording lectures. When we went into lockdown, any lectures that were still to go ahead in the timetable, were done through the online Panopto platform and

the students could then view those lectures online as and when they wanted to. I think things like that are a big opportunity. That technology has been around our university for a little while, but we haven't embraced it until now. I think the move to online teaching has shown us that there are those opportunities, such as, perhaps, to use Panopto more widely.

There's a technique, that you might be aware of, called '**flipped lectures**', where students undertake a piece of work in advance of a lecture. You might ask them to read a chapter of a book or ask them to watch an online recording of a lecture, then you use the teaching session or the timetable slot for more of a discursive and interactive session with the students. Rather than just the old 'sage on the stage' of an hour long lecture, there is much more of a conversation. You come back to that dialogue idea, where it's more of a co-construction of learning. Going forward, one of the opportunities that's come out of this is that, like a number of institutions, we're now taking an 'active blended learning' approach. Our large group teaching will now be an online discussion rather than it just being a transmission model of learning, while we'll still have face-to-face contact teaching and tutorials in the studio. So I think we will emerge into a blended learning environment that combines both online and face-to-face teaching. With the online tutorials, some tutors actually recorded their sessions so the students were able to play them back. Unlike in studio, it doesn't just become something that happens at a moment in time, where students come in for a tutorial and then discuss the work and go away. And there's no real record of that conversation, other than any marked-up drawings that we made. I think the opportunity for students to be able to play back recorded content is excellent as they can remind themselves of what was being talked about at the time and go and relive that piece of learning. So I think there are opportunities there to use technologies that were already perhaps in existence, but we weren't using as effectively or we weren't using to try and support students in their learning.

*How is the in-person element of the blended learning environment going to operate at JMU?*

For contact teaching within a socially distant environment, I think the studio model lends itself quite well to that because, within the design studio, we have quite a lot of space. So we can have a small group of maybe six students per tutor coming in for a half-day session, morning and then afternoon. And we can maintain social distancing within the studio environment and still have that face-to-face contact teaching. I think in the way that they present their drawings is likely to be different. We're looking at a strategy of students uploading their drawings to the virtual learning environment the day before, and then the tutor will download the drawings and then we'll project the them using screens in the studio that allow us to draw over and review them. So rather than physical drawings, it's more likely to be digital drawings on a screen rather than the traditional drawings on a desk or pinning their drawings to the wall, as has been the case in previous years.

*What would you say is one of your favourite resources to use, especially when in designing your online course elements?*

One thing we have been looking at more is some of the lectures by high-profile architects that are out there, which quite often they're available through formats like **YouTube**. We've been placing a resource of online lectures, not only just by ourselves, but also by signature architects or urban designers or artists, talking about their own work. I think that the opportunity to embed links through Canvas to those wider

collection of online materials is great, because then the students are not only reading about the material, they're also able to watch it. Within art and design and architecture, it's very much about visual representation. It's about seeing the drawings, the models, the buildings, and the artworks. It's good to use resources, like online lectures through YouTube, in order for students to widen their understanding of the context of architecture and art and design.

*Where do you think the direction of higher education is headed?*

That's a really interesting question. I think the design studio is a central element of the student learning experience in architecture, art and design disciplines. I think it's so central to that dialogue-driven, socio-constructivist approach to learning. I hope and I think that the design studio should remain very much a focal point of teaching.

Certainly there are opportunities within the active blended learning approach for adopting perhaps more digital technologies through flipped lectures or through using the timetabled teaching sessions for lectures to do different things. To have more discursive teaching sessions, rather, as I say, the traditional transmission-based approach to lecturing. Where students with a flipped lecture can watch material beforehand and then come to the session, whether it's back in the actual campus itself or whether it's taking place in an online forum, to have a much more, as I say, conversational approach about what that material was.

I think in assessment and feedback, obviously, our students have been submitting all of their work online. And I think the actual physical reality of those drawings and those physical models is really important. As I say, a physical model communicates certain things that a CAD model can't really do. So I think, hopefully, we will find a way back to that traditional format of presentation in studio.

I think certainly technologies like virtual reality would allow a student and a tutor to walk through buildings at their developmental design stage, perhaps in a way that we don't at the moment. So as students build ever-more-refined CAD models of their buildings, there's an opportunity to create a virtual reality walk-through, in which a student and a design tutor are actually able to see what the design would look like from within and without, as the student's going through the design process. So I think there are technologies out there, things like virtual reality, that may well lend themselves to a more rapid adoption within an online environment. But I think still the physical reality of materials and physical models is still really important. I wouldn't want to see that lost in the next ten years. I think a design studio is so important as a dialogue-driven learning space that I think that should remain. It's been there for decades, if not centuries. So I think it should still stay as a core element of the art and design and architecture curriculum.

*In that regard, do you also think then, that the design disciplines, or creative disciplines generally, struggle more than others because there are certain elements that are more difficult to translate?*

Yes, it has certainly been a challenge. For example, where students would normally have access to workshops and facilities within the building to make their models, they haven't been able to access these as campuses closed down completely, so students weren't able to access those digital model-making

materials or the workshops in the same way that they would be able to. So I think, going forward, there is a focus on the way in which those workshops can now begin to function under the new social distancing over the next few months, so the students still have access to those facilities. And I think that'll be really important because it is very much, as I say, an experiential process and a key part of that is being able to fabricate models and test ideas out. I know that students are very resourceful and a lot were making their own models at home using whatever materials and resources they had. But I think once we get back into campus teaching, even on a more socially distanced, limited basis, those workshop facilities should be there for those students to be able to access. So I'm hopeful and confident that this will still be the way.

## **Reflection**

Due to the on-going lockdowns in the UK since my interview, teaching that would have taken place in studio has continued to be conducted online. During this, I've become much more cognisant of the different nature of the conversations that used to occur in studio – the different forms of dialogue. There is a rich mixture, including the one-to-one tutorials, informal peer discussion between students, workshop sessions and design reviews (also known as crits or juries). However, I've come to realise that when these different conversations all take place online, in the same virtual space, they become much less distinct from each other.

The design review is a good example of this. In studio, these are a formal presentation of students' work, used for formative feedback. They happen every three or four weeks, interspaced between the weekly one-to-one tutorials. As opposed being conducted around a table, however, students pin their work up, and present it to a panel comprising of a tutor, a guest critic who often works in professional practice, and a small group of peers from the student's tutorial group. After describing their work to the panel, the student is asked questions that probe their ideas and provided with verbal feedback. These reviews constitute important milestones in the development of a student's project, and they are a key event within studio culture with their own distinctive praxis. However, design reviews conducted online become very similar to the format of another tutorial.

A consequence of this, I've come to realise, is that they lose their gravity within the pedagogic structure of design learning. I have discussed this with our students and they confirmed my perceptions, describing online reviews as more informal than their physical counterpart in studio, and the dialogic interaction being more of a conversation with the reviewers. Because of this, however, online design reviews lack the symbolic weight of a physical review, which is a significant source of motivation for them to advance their work.

Furthermore, the JMU students also suggested that online reviews may have hindered the development of essential skills, experience and confidence in presenting physically and before an audience. I've become acutely aware there may be subsequent impacts arising from this, as we return to teaching and learning in the physical studio after such a prolonged hiatus. Public speaking is a demanding affair. On return to studio, our final year undergraduates will have not presented their work in the traditional design review format, before a physical audience of their peers and critics, for eighteen months. Some, if not many, are likely to find reviews in studio even more daunting, and need thoughtful support in the

transition back to physical studio culture and the teaching and learning methods that go with it. I believe this will, however, provide us with an opportunity to reflect and take stock on those practices. The design review itself is not without criticism, and the return to studio could be a timely moment to address those critiques of the crit.

## **About**

Charlie Smith teaches on the undergraduate and postgraduate architecture programs in the School of Art and Design at Liverpool John Moores University, in the United Kingdom. Primarily he works as a studio design tutor, but he also lectures across these programs. As a reader in creative pedagogies, his research lies primarily in the field of learning and teaching in creative disciplines, and in particular in assessment and feedback, and how these impact on the student experience. His edited book, *Progressive Studio Pedagogy: Examples from Architecture and Allied Design Fields*, was published by Routledge in December 2020.