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Digital storytelling: A relational pedagogic approach to rebuilding hybrid places for creativity, equity and community building in a crisis

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Abstract   The COVID-19 pandemic had an impact on human flourishing worldwide as in-person teaching and learning provision within universities and schools rapidly shifted online. This exposed challenges as staff and students worked from home. Digital competences in online pedagogy differed across teaching teams, access to digital equipment, technical and social infrastructure was limited, specific fields of study had different requirements, and physical distancing measures heightened social isolation. 'The Ship of Theseus' is a thought experiment that poses the question: if every part of a ship is replaced, is it still the same ship? The authors apply the Ship of Theseus to reflect on experiences of rebuilding and reimagining teaching and learning online in a crisis. This intergenerational, practice-informed case study considers a strategic role for digital storytelling on the Digital Media and Communications BSc (DMC) at Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU) during the COVID-19 pandemic. A student-led component

was supported by two research internships as part of MMU's extracurricular programme, Rise. Catering specifically for students with culturally diverse backgrounds, Rise enables students to enhance their degree profile through activities such as volunteering, self-study on other learning platforms, work experience or research projects. The two student co-authors cooperated as peers, and as part of the research team in order to critique and reimagine curriculum content delivery in a crisis. This was informed by the literature and student co-authors' critical reflections on their lived experience of pandemic online teaching and learning and prototyping an equitable alternative to build a creative community that co-imagines different desires and visions of the future from an inequitable present. In applying the Ship of Theseus to the use of digital storytelling to support online teaching and learning, we offer active learning strategies to reinvigorate relational pedagogic approaches that position online learning within wider debates to transform higher education. The authors suggest that digital storytelling can rebuild social connections and transform online spaces into hybrid places where meaningful and creative playfulness can become anchored within practice. We conclude that designing for equity by extending digital storytelling communities of practice beyond university learning environments provides alternative spaces that potentially transform how learners respond equitably to global crises together. While new forms of digital storytelling, cooperation, co-learning and community building are invaluable, the rapid convergence of digital technologies and media by industry warrants active stewarding to address emergent digital media ethical challenges, including accessibility, privacy and equity.

KEYWORDS: COVID-19 pandemic, digital storytelling, digital equity, relational pedagogy, active learning, online and hybrid, community building

INTRODUCTION

Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU) is a large campus-based university in the centre of Manchester in the north-west of England, which gained university status through the UK Government's Further and Higher Education Act in 1992.[1] Now, with over 40,000 students and 4,000 staff, MMU adopts an active learning approach to teaching and assessment built upon constructivist theory in line with Bloom's Taxonomy, where students are active participants in their own learning.[2]

The Digital Media and Communications BSc (DMC) undergraduate degree explores the creative application and critique of digital communication and media technologies. DMC offers students the opportunity to develop a creative identity, digital portfolio and a career within the digital and creative sector. Taught in-person, on campus, students access digital studios equipped with audio–visual equipment, computers, software, user testing facilities and technical expertise. Students also gain access to Manchester's burgeoning creative digital industries which spans e-sports, gaming, broadcast, digital entertainment, marketing and an independent arts scene.

The COVID-19 pandemic unfolded as a converging crisis of ecologic, social and digital disruption, which had an impact on student and societal well-being.[3,4,5] The authors outline and reflect on their approach to designing and delivering equitable online learning on DMC practical media production modules. The authors highlight digital storytelling strategies aligned with best practice and emerging trends from effective online learning pedagogy. A student-led component prototyped digital equity, speculating on how to make accessible, relevant curriculum content to build an international community to navigate the crisis together.

STORYTELLING IN A CRISIS

> 'In order to live, we make up stories about ourselves and others, about the personal as well as the social past and future.'[6]

Storytelling is a universal human endeavour, and, as author Margaret Atwood asserts, storytelling is part of being human.[7] Shared around campfires, on travels and while waiting for crises to pass,[8] stories help make sense of the world as a form of 'everyday theorising'.[9] When reality becomes complex, stories give life form and can help people to make lifestyle choices.[10] By reflecting on stories, learning can improve.[11] Speculative fiction author, Ursula Le Guin asserted that 'to see that your life is a story while you're in the middle of living it may be a help to living it well'.[12] In troubled times, storytelling offers ways to adapt by making sense of 'uncertain' or new situations and can strengthen social bonds, intergroup skills and identity.[13]

Telling stories allows problems to be faced together. Poet, writer and civil rights activist, Maya Angelou, ascertained that 'there is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you'.[14] Within education, stories are a means to surface 'desires, hopes, fears and dreams for the future and engaging with the rich complexities of the present'.[15] Learning benefits arise by encouraging students to make connections between 'stories of the world and their own stories'.[16] Stories can play a 'role in meaning making, life making and world making'.[17]

DIGITAL STORYTELLING AND ACTIVE LEARNING

Digital storytelling is an umbrella term for combining traditional storytelling with the use of multimedia technologies to create, assemble and share immersive and interactive stories, published on the Internet.[18] A digital story is creatively expressed through digital media assets that typically combine photographs, video, audio and text. Lasting 2–10 minutes in length, digital stories can share fictional, personal, historical or experimental narratives.[19,20]

Digital storytelling is well evidenced as an effective tool for supporting students across age ranges in formal and informal educational contexts. These practices are often used by educators to enhance discussion and communication skills while fostering information exchange, digital literacy and boosting social and psychological well-being.[21] Combining story generation workshops with equipment and software workshops[22] can support students to become active contributors sharing their 'ideas, feelings and thoughts' to make learning new skills emotionally engaging and relevant.[23]

Educators can build and combine teaching strategies to activate learning by generations who have grown up with the Internet. Digital storytelling can be used as an activity in itself, as a way to critically assess or research story topics, to encourage creativity by experimenting, constructing knowledge through multimedia creation, to support students to learn through reflection and from building in peer and educator feedback.[24]

Active learning is a structured approach to teaching instruction that promotes student engagement and responsibility for learning through experience, problem solving and collaborating or cooperating with peers.[25] This promotes higher-order thinking skills, deepens student understanding and leads to effective knowledge translation to professional practice and everyday life.[26] An active approach can 'improve the dynamics of the class and the student–teacher interaction.[27] Studies from before and during the pandemic demonstrate that active learning is effective in fostering critical thinking, knowledge retention and sustaining learning compared to traditional methods,[28] including within remote-learning environments.[29,30] While digital storytelling is constructively aligned as an active learning tool, in the pandemic the rapid shift to

online provision from domestic spaces exposed several challenges — not least, access to digital infrastructure.

The Ship of Theseus: A thought experiment

'They took away the old timbers from time to time, and put new and sound ones in their places, so that the vessel became a standing illustration for the philosophers in the mooted question of growth, some declaring that it remained the same, others that it was not the same vessel.'[31]

Plutarch's Ship of Theseus thought experiment can be applied to anything with replaceable parts, but in essence it is a philosophical foray into memory, cognition, identity and time. Centuries later, Hobbes developed Plutarch's thought experiment by considering that the old, replaced timbers of the ship are kept and put together in the same order to rebuild the ship.[32] Hobbes further questions whether the identity of the ship depends on the matter from which it is made. Arguably the adventures that occur on the ship give the ship its identity as much as the materials from which it is made.

We apply the Ship of Theseus thought experiment to reflect on the replacement of in-person teaching and learning with online teaching and learning in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. This case study seeks to offer digital storytelling as a teaching strategy to reinvigorate practice and position online learning within ethical debates on access to higher education, including digital equity and the civic role of higher education to respond to global crises, including climate change and inequality.[33,34]

During the pandemic students had no access to campus, including digital studios, professional kit and technical expertise. Independent regulator of higher education in England, the Office for Students (OfS) defines 'digital poverty' as lacking 'access to one of the core items of digital infrastructure … i.e. appropriate hardware (computer, tablet or laptop), appropriate software, reliable Internet access, technical support and repair when required, a trained teacher or instructor, an appropriate study space'.[35] Evidence from the Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL) team at MMU indicated that digital access varied between students, and large proportions of students were accessing virtual learning environments (VLEs) from their mobile phones or tablets.

The Ship of Theseus poses the question: If every part of a ship was replaced, one at a time, would it still be the same ship?[36] This thought experiment provided the impetus to consider which elements of in-person teaching and learning and the technical filmmaking and photography processes can be removed before it is no longer possible to teach digital media to undergraduate students.

A RELATIONAL APPROACH TO REFLECTING ON PEDAGOGY

Spanning three generations, the research team comprised two senior lecturers, two lecturers and two second-year undergraduates. The team worked together over a three-month period, working across intergenerational and intersectional[37] perspectives in order to reflect on applying digital storytelling to the design and delivery of online teaching and learning practices during the COVID-19 pandemic. The team then split into peer pairs to write up reflections, informed by the literature, on three aspects of teaching and learning practice: (1) module redesign and delivery; (2) multimedia production, specifically, photography and filmmaking practices; and (3) prototyping digital equity to reflect from a student-led perspective. The student-led component acknowledges recommendations from qualitative and quantitative studies that foreground tuning into students' perspectives on equitable educational futures, given the socioeconomic, health and well-being pandemic impacts on young people.[38,39]

MODULE REDESIGN AND DELIVERY

DMC practical units comprised classes of 35–45 undergraduate students initially supported by a teaching team comprising senior lecturers who had not met in person. In considering the Ship of Theseus thought experiment for module redesign and delivery, how do you recreate the intimacy that working or learning in the same physical space creates? While redesigning and planning two, six-week DMC practical content production modules, the teaching team built reciprocal connections as peers sharing stories through music, films and inspiration from digital practice in audio documentary making, commissioning and curating artist and community programmes at international industry festivals and events, including during the pandemic.[40,41,42,43] Collaborative documents were used to build in peer feedback as content was developed. To address and plan for the initial uncertainty, the team planned for online only, hybrid and face-to-face scenarios. An asset-based approach was adopted in which it was recognised that everyone, including students, had expertise to contribute. Authentic assessments replaced the traditional essay, and smaller peer to peer group working was supported alongside an increase in one-to-one tutorials within a module.

Podcasts

Initial points of inspiration between the teaching team manifested within module delivery as a 3–5-minute podcast series, produced by the teaching team, student microtasks to curate playlists of points of inspiration and weekly industry practitioner talks reflecting the state of the industry. Module podcasts were produced in a conversational style, building rapport between educators and drawing on their inspiration points, including musical riffs and lyrics from the album *The Last Days of Oakland* by Fantastic Negrito.[44] The album spoke to the present moment, linking everyday life to social movements using wry humour, and connecting to a place that both educators felt connected to. The album set the tone for the podcasts and learning design ethos.

Shared at the start of the week, podcasts replaced hour-long lectures, to make space for dedicated structured support. Podcasts offered entry points into curriculum content, focusing students on weekly tasks to progress towards the summative assessment. Educators experimented by making the podcasts on mobile phones using free audio applications and tested for ease of use and sound quality. Testing digital applications was introduced as a microtask for students to actively build knowledge individually and through peer cooperation.

Weekly podcast topics ranged from 'how to get into a creative mindset', 'exploring points of inspiration', 'researching stories' and 'getting to know your equipment', to 'planning a COVID-19-safe shoot' and 'how to prepare for post-production'. Audio podcasts were chosen, rather than video, as MMU's TEL specialists indicated that many students were using mobile phones to access course content and downloading large video files have a cost implication. Audio podcasts could also be listened to while doing other activities (cooking, cleaning, shopping or working) which recognised the challenge of working without access to dedicated workspaces or having caring responsibilities.[45] Captioned versions of the podcasts were made available.

Creating playlists

Playlists provide a different way to think about inspiration besides going to the library, looking at books or digital work online. Musical playlists, for example, offer autonomy in the listener's experience of time and space, and innovations in digital streaming services make musical accompaniment of learning widespread.[46] Similarly, curating playlists of music, videos,

games and digital applications personalises learning as it requires choices to be made, much like creating a mood board. This activity aimed to support students to place themselves in the creative headspace to intentionally evoke a mood within their work. Students approached these tasks to suit the equipment they had access to. Students were encouraged to search online to explore and critically assess different sources. Prior to releasing tasks, educators checked that microtasks could be carried out on a mobile phone to reduce participation barriers.

Scaffolding learning

The pedagogical approach taken was informed by Salmon's five-stage model for effective online learning. This model encourages supporting students through a 'structured developmental process', using digital microtasks to build confidence and expertise in online learning.[47]

Microtasks were initially developed and tested by educators and then used to engage students within the VLE to build digital learning competencies. This approach scaffolds student learning through engagement, personalisation, support, critical reflection and exploration. These five elements are crucial to build learner autonomy towards the summative assessment.[48]

Through module redesign and delivery, educators built in the five stages of Salmon's model (1) creating *access and motivation* by reducing barriers to participation; (2) fostering *online socialisation* and (3) fostering *information exchange* ahead of students making use of course materials from which to (4) *construct* and *share knowledge* for (5) student *development* and *community building* in the production and sharing of student work. Educators expanded on Salmon's model by introducing 'community building' within stage 5 (see Table 1). This community building component encouraged connections beyond the VLE by engaging external

audiences to respond to and connect with students work in the making, critiquing and sharing of student portfolios. Here, Internet digital making is a way to foster creativity, connect and build community.[49]

For each stage of the model, the required level of interactivity and support increases. This could potentially introduce inequity, favouring those students with greater home support and disadvantaging those students with additional caring responsibilities. Consequently, the educators brought in additional specialist support — in film and photography — to retain student engagement throughout module delivery. This allowed for additional one-to-one tutorial guidance that worked flexibly to student availability.

Industry practitioners offered short talks on digital practice, including storyboarding, documentary filmmaking and media convergence where technology, industry and social contexts blur boundaries between content consumers and creators.[50] Industry practitioners shared the ways in which the pandemic was accelerating a new wave of digital disruption and media convergence, which is paving the way for the emergence of technological innovations, such as the metaverse, a hypothetical concept which evolved from science fiction storytelling[51] as a post-real virtual and augmented reality–based iteration of the Internet in which users interact and are immersed as avatars in computer-generated worlds, which manifest today as shared live experiences.[52,53,54] The metaverse is claimed to represent a paradigm shift towards a decentralised Internet with greater potential for decision making by the communities that participate.

Importantly, hearing about these developments helped students to recognise the relevance of undertaking a digital media degree. Students gained confidence from these conversations and connections to a professional creative community and industry practitioners who were also adapting and could learn from student experiences

Table 1: Integrating Salmon's five-stage online model within DMC module delivery. The table is not exhaustive, but offers microtask examples that foster active learning and progress learner autonomy

	Students	Teaching practice
Stage 1: Access and motivation	**Engagement** Students were introduced to upcoming practical modules to foster interest and to gauge digital access anonymously.	**Personalisation and exploration** Conversational 3–5-minute podcasts referencing course and industry material would end with a call to action in the form of a microtask that could be followed up in online synchronous sessions.
Stage 2: Online socialisation	**Exploration, engagement and personalisation** Student microtasks encourage students to engage with an aspect discussed in the podcast, alone and as peers.	**Exploration and support** 20-minute industry practitioners talks sharing how working environments, practices and workflows were disrupted by the pandemic and how industry was responding. Students gained industry feedback on their digital story ideas.
Stage 3: Information exchange	**Engagement and critical reflection** Students were invited to respond to a creative task, such as storyboarding, and to submit it in advance of synchronous sessions for peer review.	**Support** Small breakout rooms with specialist practitioners in photography, audio and filmmaking were offered once a week, to progress student work through peer-to-peer practice sharing and one-to-one aesthetic and technical guidance.
Stage 4: Knowledge construction	**Critical reflection** Students worked individually and in groups to find, test and peer review digital applications for photography, filmmaking and audio production. Students rated applications on a shared slide deck to co-construct knowledge.	**Critical reflection** Students were tasked with creating a short 'how to' digital media asset to demonstrate and share an aspect of learning from practice.
Stage 5: Development and community building	**Engagement and support** Summative assessments encouraged students to build community through peer and online interactions to make, share and teach 'how to' interact with or contribute to their content online.	**Critical reflection and engagement** Students curated and documented learning into blogs. Students were encouraged to make blogs available for comment, to build in peer-to-peer and educator feedback, as a form of digital critique, as their work developed.

of digital disruption as they attempted to participate in their course decentralised from the main campus and often operating from mobile networks and devices.

Authentic assessments

Authentic assessments were introduced to produce evidence of student's learning that reflected real life tasks, problem solving with multiple solutions that students might need to address on graduating.[55] Essays were replaced with critical reflections on creative digital practice through blogs and digital stories. This included 'how to' digital media assets that demonstrated students' ability to share what they had learned by teaching an aspect of digital practice in order to build community. With increasingly digitised

workplaces, building digital more concretely into authentic assessment was timely.[56] All proposed changes were internally and externally reviewed to ensure standards and quality were being maintained.

MULTIMEDIA PRODUCTION

Lecturers specialising in photography and filmmaking outline below approaches to building a community of competent audio–visual makers, despite the removal of access to professional digital equipment and studio spaces. A specific challenge was finding a way to improve the online learning experience. The aesthetic of students and staff appearing in digital 'boxes', as headshots or as capitalised initials, affected staff and students' expectations within the space. Consequently,

practical tasks and educational content were amended. For students, the challenge was to regain connections with each other and to produce digital stories within COVID-19 restrictions. This led to reflection on what was considered as a learning space; the physicality of it and how educators and students had to transform the pedagogy of media practice and shift to alternative spaces to produce and share work.

Alternative spaces

While this case study focuses on digital media practice, there is perhaps much to learn from art studio practice, and akin to the Ship of Theseus, the notion that making spaces were 'both dematerializing and rematerializing in new ways',[57] which helped to move away from being conditioned to encountering a learning space as a room with lots of people in it. Alternative spaces had to be found for the exchange of knowledge, practices and skills. In examining digital learning spaces, Harrison states: '[…] we see a blurring of the boundaries between formal and informal learning opportunities as educators use openness to try to overcome barriers to access and connectivity.'[58] It was necessary to create a more explorative making space. Here, the teaching team facilitated a community of practice through peer-learning, while guiding key elements of creative making.

Interaction and collaboration were key to fostering active learning in online and domestic making spaces. Students were placed into smaller peer-working groups (via Microsoft Teams breakout rooms) and given the agency to construct stories inspired by their own sources of inspiration. There is evidence that when students are given the space and the support system of each other, '[knowledge] spreads exceedingly rapidly and effectively'.[59]

Lecturers acted as a bridge for students into practical making, allowing for dialogue on current digital photographic and

filmmaking practices, the use of social media technologies and digital literacy.

Photography

During the pandemic, photography was used within DMC practical units as a tool to regain control of learners' domestic spaces. By combining photography with a storytelling approach through a series of time-based practical photographic tasks, the challenge as educators was to offer an experiential, active learning approach.

An example of a task given to students is analysed below to reflect on the approach taken for creating digital photography assets. During online sessions students were tasked to produce a triptych in which they might reference themselves or objects within the home, and question their surroundings using the photographic medium. Through this triptych they were tasked with creating a straightforward narrative, demonstrating an understanding of sequencing and effective storytelling in a three-way scenario. The approach activated their home environments, photographic skillsets and supported them towards creating the summative assessment.

The task as given to students:

1. Create three images using your phone/ camera. They will be connected to each other and create a small narrative together. Tell a story: it can be simple, personal or subtle;
2. The three images need to be linked in some way. They need to work as a triptych;
3. The link should be supported by: colour, composition, text you use to introduce it, symbols in each image, repeated element (example: person, object) or anything relevant to your story;
4. In addition, consider what information you will be giving your audience. Would you add a caption if posted on social

media? What are you trying to say to the viewer?;

5. Think of a sentence to describe the triptych;
6. Upload all the images and any supporting material on Dropbox by Friday 9.00 am, to discuss together on Teams.

The three main questions posed to the students were:

1. How can text change your story?;
2. How can you tell a story in just three images with a time limit?;
3. How are you going to use your surroundings for your story?

Students had a day to complete this task; this was their second limitation. The triptych task, and the imposed limitations, produced the outcome of instinctive and playful visual responses. The task intended to activate dialogue within peer groups and challenge their preconceptions of the maker space. Students embraced this hands-on approach, and the task supported them in breaking down self-imposed rules. Figure 1 offers an example response to the task.

These photos act as a documentation, seemingly searching to self-see, or at least notice a version of self which can only be noticed by the other. Considering the words of Auslander: 'A still photograph does not show you just that moment, it also implies what came before it and implies what comes after it.'[60]

Graduate, Kayanna Gibson, a second-year student at the time, considered artist Carrie Mae Weems in her work (see Figure 1). Gibson responded to Weems' artworks from the 'Kitchen Table Series'[61] through her use of black and white, ideas of performance and identity. Her voice is visible through the photographic lens; the performative qualities of Weems' work reflect on Gibson's presentation of self and construction of the 'perfect self' for social media. In these quick and reactive responses, Gibson constructs a three-way narration using a mirror, different clothing and use of text. Weems uses her body to 'respond to a number of issues: woman's subjectivity, woman's capacity to revel in her body, and the woman's construction of herself, and her own image.'[62] Gibson achieves this, similarly, through the play

Another Side of my mirror
Here I'm in my natural state, this is the side of me that most people wouldn't post to social media.

Best Self
Here I'm in my boots, silky shirt and my hair flowing nicely. I am presenting my best self which many of us try to do on social media.

The Pose
We all know that a good pose is key when trying to take a good picture. It's what speaks volumes for your image, your stance and form says a lot to others watching and here I'm boosted up, chin up because I feel confident.

Image Credit: Kayanna Gibson

Figure 1: Gibson's response to the triptych photography task

of mirroring herself, seeing herself and performing for others.

Photographic tasks such as this triptych task activated spaces into places. Tuan's[63] consideration on the transformation of a space into a place in connection to a digital 'maze' (eg Microsoft Teams) was a space in which staff and students entered to collaborate and build a sense of belonging to a creative community. Landmarks emerged (eg new teaching tactics) allowing educators to create a specific path via entry points into the place and exit points back into the domestic space again. In this way, the initially unfamiliar digital maze was transformed into a hybrid place of intergenerational connectivity, creativity and mutual reciprocity. Students' movement between familiar landmarks, such as into breakout rooms, accomplishing a task or contributing to peer learning, signals that students were gaining confidence within the place.

Filmmaking

Pedagogical practice in the field of digital media is rooted in storytelling. Cameras, tripods, lighting and microphones are tools used in the journey from idea conception to output. During the pandemic, staff and students had no access to the audio–visual store — a key teaching resource, and which the students are usually expected to access to produce summative assessments.

How do you make a film without a camera?

Challenged to teach filmmaking actively while seated at home and teaching via the online learning environment of Microsoft Teams, the filmmaking lecturer considered how to make a film without a camera. This required consideration of what a film is.

What is a film?

Filmmaking hinges on the stories being told. Undergraduate students enter higher education from diverse backgrounds, some have never adopted a creative practice approach, and often do not consider themselves storytellers. With the emergence of the crisis, the curriculum was focused on the core elements of storytelling.

Film and media semiotics theory explores how the visual form goes beyond language, communicating with coded signs which adopt an elusive third dimension. Zantides explores the conceptual structures which are interpreted through 'metaphorical similarity',[64] thus challenging the notion of a singular intention and outcome. Storytelling and audio–visual language are therefore inherently linked, whether or not the creator intends to produce narrative. A story will always be told — and it was key to the filmmaking lecturer's teaching practice that the digital curriculum reflected these inherent truths. By dedicating teaching time to focus on narratives and structural theory, students understood more fully what it meant to tell a story, without ever having picked up a camera. Students built upon each other's learning to produce their own definitions and experiences of creative practice.

Here, what a film *is* became shaped by the experiences and perspectives co-produced by staff and students. By embracing the roots of storytelling practices and acknowledging the ebbs and flows of digital media industries, lecturers were able to situate pedagogy in the centre of these two worlds and deliver meaningful, practice-based teaching to students in their domestic environments.

What is a camera?

The digital camera enables users to electronically capture and store images and video. As these parts of the metaphorical ship disappeared, they had to be replaced. Finding new ways for students to capture and store video was imperative. Some students had access to their own filmmaking equipment, but others did not. Equitable approaches were adopted within module and marking

design to ensure students were not placed at a disadvantage without access to professional kit.

With the film industry in flux and disrupted by the pandemic, space was created to exchange DMC students' digital storytelling approaches with industry practitioners. Film and television sets were perceived generally as non-essential and were no longer permitted to operate.[65] As the student experience mirrored that of the creative industries, the teaching team looked to explore new ways of making content; staying in touch with evolving creative industry practices became invaluable.

Despite being one of the hardest-hit sectors during the pandemic, creative industry practices evolved rapidly to meet the audience demands on the entertainment industry during lockdowns.[66] The BBC produced television shows such as *Staged*,[67] featuring actors David Tennant and Michael Sheen as themselves bickering about working from home and surviving virtual productions. *Staged* was filmed using primarily video-conferencing technology, while distributors like Amazon Prime offered feature films such as *Host*[68] on their homepage. *Host* is a supernatural horror, in which, during an online séance, six friends accidentally invite a demonic presence. *Host* takes place within the virtual location of a computer screen.

Hybrid digital storytelling formats

Desktop documentary filmmaking is a form of documentary practice, based on the film essay, where there is no live-action shooting. Taking advantage of the Internet, the desktop itself becomes the lens through which an audience experiences the story. This hybrid audio-visual method of documentary practice is crafted using a mix of archive footage, screen recording and voiceover or subtitles.[69]

Introducing this hybrid format, the filmmaking lecturer innovated the use of accessible methods for creating digital stories; students who opted to shoot a desktop documentary could create a fully crafted film without placing themselves or their community at risk. The filmmaking lecturer dedicated time in the video conferencing space to teach students how to achieve similar outcomes to what was being produced within industry. This included guiding students through screen recording on different devices and delivering workshops on optimising webcam video and audio quality. Less formally structured webinar time was then dedicated to shaping students' individual ideas and troubleshooting technical problems that arose as work was created.

Through responsive pedagogy and student willingness to adapt their personal expectations of learning technical skills within higher education, the filmmaking lecturer and students redefined what it meant to produce digital assets for undergraduate students. Alternative options that allowed students to shoot and edit on mobile smartphones were also introduced. Students were offered industry examples such as comedy drama *Tangerine*,[70] a feature film which was shot entirely using an iPhone smartphone.

Student stories and formats

Students embraced fiction and documentary formats, adopting a range of genres to express their digital stories, including drama, horror and experimental works. Some students narrated their stories as poems, songs or animations. The impact of lockdowns, social media and identity predominated. Key themes included making sense of living through the pandemic: navigating grief, loss and isolation through escapism, distraction, digital detoxing and rediscovering local and natural environments. Other topics included exploring friendship, creativity, travelling, sharing hobbies and documenting daily routines.

While some students were frustrated by the lack of access to professional equipment or traditional lectures, others enjoyed discovering workarounds through sharing practice. Some students embraced the desktop documentary format, innovating it further by incorporating gaming and animation. Do-it-yourself (DIY) mobile filmmaking practices were adopted alongside traditional filmmaking techniques.

PROTOTYPING DIGITAL EQUITY AND BUILDING COMMUNITY IN FUTURE CRISES

'To be truly visionary we have to root our imagination in our concrete reality whilst simultaneously imagining possibilities beyond that reality.'[71]

Student research internships

A specific opportunity was created for student co-authors to actively contribute to the production of this case study. A three-month research internship aimed at second-year undergraduates was offered through MMU's extracurricular programme, Rise.[72] Rise allows students to claim points towards their degree profile for activities such as volunteering, self-study on other learning platforms, work experience or research projects. Rise caters specifically for students with diverse backgrounds to 'expand and deepen'[73] their studies by supporting them to get involved in research. Support included a small honorarium, access to a PhD research mentor and online learning modules focused on developing research skills, gaining different perspectives on education, including anti-racist research practice and digital research methods.

The opportunity was promoted via e-mail and during DMC sessions. Students could apply through the Rise digital platform by submitting a 250-word statement expressing their interest and what they hoped to gain.

Digital skills were not a prerequisite. Two students were selected and tutored one-to-one initially to discuss their interests and to answer questions or make adjustments as required, before being introduced to one another and the wider research team. The internships took place during a holiday period when students were off campus. In some ways, this situation mirrored the pandemic, and necessitated working from home and using available digital tools to communicate and collaborate.

Students undertook a series of research tasks outlined in a brief, including agreeing a way of working, communicating as peers and with the research team and collaborating to produce an annotated literature review while drawing on their differing lived experiences of the pandemic to prototype an equitable format to make relevant content to build a learning community in the midst of a future crisis. Students presented their work as part of the research team at a National Higher Education conference.[74]

Peer-to-peer cooperation and transitioning towards independent study

Students worked in a peer pair, contributing monthly to research team meetings to share their insights and practice-based research to inform the case study and its conclusions. To support this aspect, a reflective storytelling technique inspired by the Norwegian tradition of 'dugnad'[75] was used. Dugnad encourages people to respond adaptively to their environments while improving shared or public spaces. Adopting a digital dugnad practice, the aim was to elicit a cooperative, tolerant and inclusive research community online.

Using this technique, positive and negative emotions were experience mapped over time to facilitate students to share their experience of undertaking the internships. The technique encouraged sharing of thoughts and feelings of working cooperatively, both as peers and collaborating as part of

the wider research team. This technique makes social support structures visible and enables participants to reflect on their access and peer contributions to supporting that. This approach also surfaced new insights to improve student and educator practice while building a shared sense of recognition of a learning communities' joint efforts. Further, the process aimed to reconnect students to their original motivations and future research ambitions beyond the life of the internship. This was considered an important bridge between student co-authors' second and final-year studies and the transition to independent study through a final-year project. Access to a discipline-specific PhD mentor and working with lecturers as part of a research team sought to actively engage students in what practice-based research entails and to nurture an interest.

Ways of working online

Student co-authors established preferred ways of working, including communicating as peers via messaging app, WhatsApp, planning using Trello, communicating with the research team via e-mail, attending research team meetings via Teams and creating a shareable reference using mybib.com. Students shared their work nationally by presenting their research at a hybrid academic conference using Googleslides via Zoom. Students requested an overview of the research timeline in order to co-design a schedule around existing commitments, such as part-time work.

Student co-authors reflected on differing experiences, perceptions and requirements for in-person versus online learning. A notable challenge was the aesthetic of the online learning experienced during the pandemic, where students kept their cameras off, often for good reason,[76] leaving a screen of black rectangles with embedded initials, which heightened the sense of isolation and presented a psychological barrier to accessing the interpersonal connectivity

that can enrich learning as a communal and embodied experience.[77] Audio quality, visual cues, body language and emotional gestures from lecturers need to be read alongside the content presented, as they influence student levels of engagement, satisfaction, creativity and meaning making. The importance of nonverbal communication requires deeper consideration, drawing from disability studies. As Hickman asserts, by 'pluralizing of access across multiple bodies and technologies', a learning environment can be transformed into 'an embodied interface'.[78]

Structural differences were noted within higher education internationally, with wealthier nations having greater access to broadband and Wi-Fi networks. This had implications for international students who returned home from studying in Western nations during the pandemic, but also for Asian and Chinese students who experienced heightened racism and blame for the pandemic.[79] Student co-authors noted an Italian study which highlighted the importance of civic values and solidarity and how storytelling can build a sense of community and belonging by extending civil rights, such as through large scale global cooperation in a pandemic. Here community building was central to emotional security, well-being and creating a sense of shared trust.[80]

In noting that structural inequities, extended beyond higher education, student co-authors chose to prototype an accessible video podcast using Zoom to create 10–15-minute episodes that would combine perspectives from science, arts and humanities students and lecturers, in order to offer an international perspective in which community could be built in the making of content, as a way to connect and adapt online. Captions would be produced by transcription of each episode by a workers cooperative. The podcast would then be distributed via YouTube and Spotify to allow the content to be shared beyond the university. This latter idea raised questions

around the tensions between content ownership, authorship and privacy that might arise, and the need to consider digital media ethics when making decisions about publishing online.

Inclusive learning environments

Student co-authors reflected on participating in the research environment and the support structures in place that made it an enriching and inclusive experience. Peer cooperation involved a shared commitment to undertake the work, alongside maintaining clear communication lines and ways of working with effective mutual support. Peer-to-peer cooperation was fundamental to students enjoying the experience and this differed from prior experiences of collaborative peer group work within the curriculum. Within the research team, student co-authors felt their ideas and contributions were welcomed and valued, including presenting at a national conference. This was reciprocated by educators, who valued the perspectives brought by students at a critical moment for higher education. It also serves as a reminder that 'everyone influences the classroom dynamic, that everyone contributes' and that 'these contributions are resources'.[81]

CONCLUDING REMARKS

> 'All of us have to learn how to invent our lives, make them up, imagine them. We need to be taught these skills; we need guides to show us how. If we don't, our lives get made up for us by other people.'[82]

In this case study we demonstrate ways in which a practice-based digital media curriculum was adapted to the social, physical and technological displacement that was experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. With each part of the metaphorical Ship of Theseus removed — the in-person physical classroom, the

technical infrastructure and physical sense of connection in an educational space — the authors collaborated to deliver and reimagine meaningful, socially relevant, active learning in which educators and students were transformed through encounters of creating, making and sharing digital stories.

Twenty-first-century skills of creativity, collaboration, communication, innovation and community building can be hard to sustain within UK-based educational provision which focuses from an early age on assessing an individual's ability to retain knowledge, rather than students cooperating to create and share knowledge. During the pandemic, however, online learning communities proliferated. A make-do environment of recognising existing assets, collaborating with peers and building community through exchange with those outside of the university proved vital. To create this ethos during a period of physical distancing and social isolation the authors used digital storytelling to actively rebuild a shared hybrid place for creativity, equity and community building in a crisis.

Creating a shared sense of community as creative practitioners is shaped by a myriad of design, aesthetic and ethical factors within a learning space, and achieving digital equity requires continuous and careful attention and negotiation. Rebuilding the social infrastructure that supports learning required active stewardship to enable meaningful and playful relationships with digital technology to emerge. With the return to in-person teaching on DMC, online peer-to-peer group and one-to-one tutorial sessions remain. Curating playlists continues to feature, including collating points of inspiration from field trips and building community face to face by exhibiting students' work with digital interactive elements, within public spaces.

The Ship of Theseus experiment, in which we rebuilt an active learning experience online, can perhaps remind us that access to a piece of equipment or

a physical classroom is perhaps the least important part of the ship when the fabric of society has broken down. By holding affirmative and safe spaces to navigate grief, loss and frustration, new alliances and friendships can be forged from creating, sharing and listening to stories online. Striving collectively for equitable notions of learning together is pivotal to preparing to respond to ongoing crises, evident before the pandemic, and serves as a reminder of the civic role of universities.

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DATA STATEMENT

A selection of digital stories to experience is available at Wakelet.[83] The digital dugnad tool is available for download.[84]

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