#Twittercritter: Extending the Reach of Studio

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Introduction: Twitter - the Good the Bad and the Ambiguous

In response to international drivers around enhancing student experience and also to the rapid growth of new technologies (Ritzi and Lingard, 2010) HEIs have increasingly explored the potential of emerging social media, particularly Twitter, a micro-blogging 'participatory internet technology' (Veletsianos, 2011: 336). Twitter shows particular promise for transforming the way in which scholars teach in a university environment (Greenhow et al 2009; Ebner et al 2011); offering new spaces for dynamic, creative collaboration between students-scholar in an instructional setting (Selwyn, 2012).

In contrast experienced practitioners and researchers in this area often: underline a need for caution and careful evaluation before scholars enthusiastically embrace social media (Mazer, 2013); raise questions about whether social media can be genuinely collaborative or participatory (Mayer and Puller, 2008) and even question whether social media is an appropriate media for formal learning or perhaps instead, a novelty-technology which is parts of a cycle of 'hype, hope and disappointment' (Gouseti, 2010).

Overview: the Twitter Critter Project

What follows reports on a small scale, iterative project which used Twitter (named '#TwitterCritter') in the context of studio design modules of 2nd and 3rd years on BSC (hons) Architecture and BSc (hons) Architectural Technology degree provision at a HEI in the North- West of England 2011-2012. The core aim of the project was to explore if and to what extent social media could be fruitfully used as part of the review process for student design projects.

Under this premise, the project sought to explore:

- the form of a crit held beyond the studio walls, in an online environment
- how to engage professional architects and industry professionals in students' learning and development, in particular, how a dialogue could be created between undergraduates and architects in practice. This was in the wider context of enhancing employability and professional knowledge.
- how twitter could be used in this educational context i.e. whether the project was used as a one-off event or continuously.

Twitter was chosen as the platform for enabling potential dialogue and was selected Due to its public nature. Twitter is an accessible micro-blogging medium, which is also widely used in architecture and construction industry. Main industry journals and professional bodies have a strong twitter presence (@BDonline, @ArchitectsJrnal, @RIBAJ, @CIAT, @TheCIOB, @RIBA, @angelabradyRIBA). Building Design magazine are currently holding their second review of the top 100 architecture twitter users. This is a sign of a growing online community of architects. It is also supported both synchronous real-time dialogue as well as allowing participants some degree of flexibility in how and when responses were made. This was thought of as having particular importance when encouraging busy professionals to engage.

After a period of preparation and discussions amongst the teaching team, an open invitation

was placed on the HEIs Architectural Studies Unit within the School twitter account. This invited interested Architects and construction professionals to identify their interest in engaging in critical review of students' project work (see Appendix A: Storify…). Highly structured direction was given to professionals involved prior to the events. This necessitated the use of a second social media platform - Tumblr. This was because twitter's micro-capacity (140 characters per tweet) did not allow sufficient guidance.

Initially, the project ran with a single cohort of y2 BSc (hons) Architectural Technology group of willing participants (n=08). The event was also advertised across the school to encourage other students to use the event as an indirect learning experience. Whilst a greater number of industry professionals expressed an interest, only a small number participated in this first event (n=3). Over the course of the academic year, #Twittercritter ran in five different separate iterations across three cohorts of students across two different degrees within the overall discipline of architecture. Over successive iterations, the number of participants increased with student numbers increasing to 34 and numbers of professionals engaging reached 6.

Semi structured interviews were conducted with all student-participants (n=34). Construction professionals (n=6) involved also offered significant unsolicited feedback on their experience as reviewers.

Issues with methodology:

A case study design was used methodologically in analysis of this small scale, practitioner-based project. Semi structured interviews were conducted with student-participants (n=34). Construction professionals (n=6) involved also

offered significant unsolicited feedback on their experience as reviewers. Data gathered during this project was subject to retrospective analysis using the 'open' methodology suggested by Charmaz (2003) in his guidance on data collection and data analysis and which fits within the grounded theory paradigm (Charmaz, 2003: 84). This retrospective analysis was, arguably, the most suitable methodology available because #TwitterCritter was not designed as a research project but rather as an exploratory, small-scale pedagogic project. Case study designs are frequently used in research conducted in educational settings, primarily because as Cohen and Manion (2007) note they potentially offer detailed evaluation of the case for educational practice/practitioners (68). A possible limitation of case study methodological, which we acknowledge, is that case studies can suffer weaknesses around the extent to which insights from data can be generalised (Woodside, 2010; Tight. 2010).
Future iterations of #TwitterCritter will be planned from inception as a research study as well as functioning as a pedagogic project. This will enable more intended consideration of methodology and research design.

Ethical Considerations:

Ethical considerations were a key part of #TwitterCritter. Potential student participants were invited on the clear understanding that they could withdraw from the project at any point without having to give a reason and with no adverse effect whatsoever: their work would be assessed and reviewed by the traditional means. Professional participants (architects and construction professionals) too part on exactly the same, wholly voluntary, basis. Detailed guidance emphasising the importance of constructive feedback for students was also provided. University staff acted as moderators for the #TwitterCritter account and closely monitored tweets. Ethical scrutiny of the project

at proposal/planning stage was also given by the HEI involved at a senior level. Despite all such careful preparation it is important to note that Twitter, as an open and therefore unpredictable social -media platform, holds inherent ethical dangers.

Discussion:

Whilst all iterations were wholly planned and monitored, the public nature of twitter as a form of social media means that it cannot be wholly controlled. Selwyn (2012) makes the point that use of social media in a formal educational environment carries inherent risks, suggesting that social media are socially disruptive technologies which prompt a range of deeply ideological (rather than purely technical) questions about the nature of institutionalized education.

Could changing the crit environment further develop communication skills for graduates? Once undergraduates had posted their work on twitter, interactions were monitored through the use of searchable hashtags (#twittercritter). It was found that often more than one interaction took place for each tweet sent. By placing the event on a social media platform, assuring the students it was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any point, relationships between student and critter seems to have been reconfigured. Students were entering freely into dialogues, often lasting much longer than anticipated. It should be noted here that all dialogues remained positive throughout. Each Twittercritter iteration lasted over 24 hours, with one event documenting dialogues lasting over three days. Boyer and Mitgang (1996) discuss communication limitations of traditional crits, explaining that there can be an adversarial relationship between student and tutor, which can negate two way communication. This

dictatorial style of communication can be repeated in industry, having detrimental effects on collaborative working and partnering. (Latham, 1994, Egan, 1998). By extending the reach of studio beyond the classroom walls, different communication skills were being utilised: listening and presenting.

82% of the cohort did not use twitter prior to the start of #twittercritter. This is contrary to some perceptions that all young adults regularly use social media. One revealing aspect of the project was that instruction had to be given to enable effective access. Very few of the students were aware that twitter could be used as a media for learning and research. One positive unforeseen outcome of the project was in raising undergraduates' awareness of twitter as a valuable resource for accessing online professional communities, technical updates, architectural news and employment opportunities. Participants reported that #twittercritter enhanced their skills in independent learning. In particular, the dialogue with industry professionals offered them positive feedback on their own ability to learn independently. Many of the dialogues were self-supporting without input from university tutors. By facilitating crits to exist outside of the traditional studio, the role of the tutor was de-centered and passed over to a distributed responsibility back to the student, with input from the participating professionals. Other accounts have suggested that developing increased self-responsibility amongst undergraduates is required (Nicol and Pilling, 2000).

Conclusion:

#Twittercritter offered an insight into how social media can extend the reach of studio by reformatting key attributes of the design crit. Social media do not, however offer a uncritical

panacea for extending and enhancing studio: careful planning can only partly mitigate the risks inherent in using public media.

Perhaps the most telling indicator about the success of the project is disclosed by student expectations post-project. Participants (students and professionals) urged further iterations of the project without prompts from tutors. These are planned for later in 2013/2014. In a further indicator of success there have been signifiant interest by other HEIs in this project. Subsequent iterations will significantly, involve Schools of Architecture at multiple HEIs in the UK. It seems that the critters are multiplying. One of the events was captured in a narrative form using Storify software and was shared publically on twitter. The web link for this resource can be found at: http://storify.com/arch_lintel/twittercritter

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