

**PG Certificate in  
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Declaration  <i>I declare that the work that I am submitting to be my own. Any quotations from other sources have been credited to their authors.</i>	

# Facilitating Group Cohesion in Online Art Seminars

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This essay reflects on my use of Microsoft Teams to lead a series of group seminar discussions in Critical Studies (Year 1 / Level 4 on the SEEC descriptors). Critical Studies acts as a theoretical component to the predominantly practice-based study of BA Fine Art and BA Digital Arts Computing at Goldsmiths, and is designed to support art students to contextualise and develop their own artwork and artistic methodologies within a wider awareness of art theory, history and contemporary art criticism. The focus of my research has been on how to facilitate group cohesion and peer-to-peer support in the seminars whilst using video conferencing software in a state of emergency remote learning.

## The Emphasis on Group Cohesion

Although online and blended courses can present significant advantages to learning, such as flexibility and self-pacing, since the Covid-19 outbreak many higher education courses designed for in-person teaching have had to move online without the time or resources to make use of such advantages (Hodges et al. 2020). Due to the makeshift nature of emergency remote learning, throughout the Covid-19 pandemic I have observed students and colleagues describe their experience using video conferencing for synchronous learning as ‘alienating’ and ‘isolating’. It is this feeling that I wanted to better understand and respond to as a teacher.

On top of the uncertainties surrounding the Covid-19 pandemic (which meant that students were scattered in different timezones, had unequal access to technological facilities, and varying degrees of pressures resulting from personal circumstances; c.f. Di Pietro et al. 2020; Khan et al. 2021), my students are mostly 19-20 year old practising artists who are at the start of their careers and who are often transitioning from secondary school, where art is taught with a substantially different set of learning outcomes and motivations in mind. The Critical Studies literature can be intimidating for these students, because the academic texts are often deliberately unorthodox and do not tend to follow a formula such as a scientific report which students can get used to over time. In general, there is no clear path to mastery in Art, either in practice or theory, meaning that students sometimes find it difficult to evaluate their own progress. The course does not proceed linearly, and all of its content is up for debate. This

means that Critical Studies can be a disorientating journey for students in and of itself. However, the sudden transition to remote learning adds further disorientation to their learning experience. In their systematic literature review on the impact of technology in higher education during Covid-19, Abu Talib et al. (2021) found that ‘student engagement was sometimes lacking due to factors such as reliance on recorded lectures,’ and that ‘feelings of isolation and depression from lack of personal contact,’ were common.

Additionally, because Art in HE trains the student to see themselves at the forefront of cultural innovation, the discipline has a strong legacy of placing value on peer-to-peer learning (c.f. Suchin, 2020). Students are expected to learn as much from each other as from their teachers, since they represent the new generation of artists and since their professional careers are expected to begin during study, not after. Usually, the shared, open-plan studio is a key space in which this exchange happens, encouraged through activities like group critiques, and so too is the Critical Studies seminar. Here the art student is able to take critical discourses back to the studio with their peers, work through difficult concepts together, and negotiate them in their primary form of expression: art practice. Because studio facilities have scarcely been available over the past year, this tight loop between peer discourse and practice was severely disrupted by the transition to online distance learning. Although the sense of isolation during this pandemic has not been unique to art students, there was a sense in which a fundamental educational component of the course offering had been lost.

As seminar leader, my role was to facilitate student discussion and reflection in the online seminars (synchronous), following a weekly lecture video series and readings (asynchronous). Although my role did not involve editing or contributing to the content of the teaching and learning activity, I was encouraged to express my teaching philosophy through my facilitation approach.

The guiding approaches to my teaching have been critical pedagogy (Freire, 2017; Carpenter & Mojab, 2017), which was compatible with the student-centred and dialogue-based design of Critical Studies; and Care Theory, whereby facilitating shared perspectives in my relation with students and in their relation to each other (Noddings, 2012; Murray et al., 2020) became a particularly important emphasis for me during the Covid-19 pandemic.<sup>1</sup> With these

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<sup>1</sup> Lynch (2010) argues (pre-Covid-19) that in fact, changes in the management and funding of higher education have led to ‘a logic of carelessness’ in recent years.

approaches in mind, I asked: How can I use technology to foster a sense of community in the group, and restore the students' access to each other as a key tool in their learning?

## **Online Seminar Design**

The seminar group of 18 students met in a weekly Microsoft Teams meeting over two academic terms. Both the seminars and my self-evaluation are designed in accordance with the UK Professional Standards Framework (2011).

Recent research emphasises orientation and clearly stating objectives and expectations, especially in emergency remote learning (Abu Talib et al. 2021; Khan et al. 2021). Providing frequent reminders, follow-up emails, discussion summaries, and ensuring equitable literacy in the use of the requisite technologies by orienting the students through its functionalities can make a significant difference to student engagement (Anon, 2021).<sup>2</sup> I emailed students with detailed instructions prior to meeting them and, using a combination of PDF presentation slides and screen sharing, we spent the first seminar establishing a common understanding of the platform, external learning resources like the VLE, and collectively devising ground rules for our discussions. Influenced by Freire's dialogic workshops, I asked the students what they think a seminar ought to be, and how we could collectively tailor them to serve their practices, taking the effects of Covid-19 into account. By emphasising student agency from the start, I aimed to empower them to take collective ownership over the seminar as a strategy for establishing group cohesion.

I prompted students to frequently and openly talk about their own art practices alongside discussions of wider artists and theorists' work. Since developing a thriving art practice is the primary learning outcome of an Art degree, it seems vital to continually make connections between wider discourses and the individual student's practice. This could also potentially add personal insight during discussion and promote a sense of relationship building and community in the seminar group.

When it comes to teacher-student strategies for student engagement, Anon's 2021 study (based on student feedback questionnaires) cites 'teacher interactiveness' as the most significant, followed by 'repetition', pointing back to the need for orientation. Similarly, in

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<sup>2</sup> Khan et al. also found from their student questionnaires that students found video announcements especially engaging, where they could either see the teacher announcing something, or sharing their screen for instructions.

their study of remote teacher education during Covid-19, Carrillo & Flores (2020) remark that, ‘In the development of online activities, an optimal level of social presence by instructors was shown to be essential in achieving participation, collaboration and fostering the cohesion of the learning community.’ However, they also caution that the presence of the instructor must not override student participation. My own positioning as a co-learner (Freire, 2017) and active listener became therefore a key feature of my teaching. Given the omnidirectional, ‘broadcasting’ nature of communication in a virtual meeting gallery, I tried to remain an active participant whilst also endeavouring to encourage further interactions between students and promote ‘the co-construction of knowledge among participants.’ (ibid). Khan et al. (2021) found in their survey of HE psychology students during Covid-19 that peer cooperation and witnessing other students contributed positively was a key factor in engagement. I therefore tried to use my role to set an example of trust and inclusion, whilst placing emphasis on the contributions of each student by frequently repeating and naming their individual contributions..

Carrillo & Flores further make the point that social media can play a role in enhancing peer cooperation and community, in that self-projection through online profiles can contribute to ‘establishing trust and belongingness’. However, it seems important that such social interactions take place independently of the teacher, given the unequal power relations between teacher and student. I encouraged students to use the same Teams meeting room to meet up and discuss the lectures with each other beyond seminar hours, and prompted them to form networks beyond the classroom. I also suggested they pair up and do an ‘essay swap’ to give each other feedback on their assignments.<sup>3</sup>

In conversation with colleagues, the issue relating to emergency remote learning that has caused most ambivalence has been the blurring of professional and personal boundaries, particularly when it comes to requiring students to turn their web cameras on in virtual meetings. Reflecting on this, Murray et al. (2020) have on the one hand observed benefits to personal disclosure, including (citing Mcfarlane, 2004), ‘equalising power relationships between lecturers and students.’ They point out that cautious self-disclosure could provide reassurance to students from disadvantaged backgrounds and increase group trust, however acknowledge that some might precisely prefer the protection of anonymity.<sup>4</sup> Upon weighing

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<sup>3</sup> Given this emphasis on student independence here, I do not know if the students took any of these suggestions up or not.

<sup>4</sup> C.f. Edouard Glissant (1997) on the right to opacity.

the benefits of disclosure versus anonymity, I asked everyone to turn on their cameras at the beginning of each seminar, whilst always saying that not doing so would be fine too. I had to take extra care to bear the few invisible students in mind because of the way Microsoft Teams privileges the display of visible users, yet I was able to call upon students to contribute in any way they could: using their microphone if they had one, or the chat box if they didn't.

In a lecture on emergency remote teaching in response to Covid-19, Paul Kirschner recommended that more emphasis be placed on the consolidation of existing knowledge without expecting a business-as-usual pace of learning from students. Because of the unusual and often unequal pressures faced by students, I opted to keep the seminars as straightforward as possible, devoting the entire hour to group discussion. I wanted to avoid placing bandwidth pressure on students with different levels of WiFi access, but engaged in the use of accompanying technologies, such as film viewings via YouTube and screen share, from my own device. Dialogue was encouraged by emphasising that the seminar was a space for voicing confusion and struggle with the subject matter. However, in hindsight I think I may have underestimated students' willingness to adapt to new instruction and engage in interactive prompts. In future I would use break-out rooms to diversify the mode of engagement (Carrillo, C. & Flores, 2020; Khan, 2021; Abu Talib et al. 2021). As a learner, I have noted how effectively smaller groups can be used to stimulate discussion at the start of a larger group learning activity.

While the discussions took place, I encouraged students to contribute their own further references on the lecture theme into the chat box. After each seminar, I collected the contributions and circulated them in an email thread, which grew as students replied with further recommended reading. Though stimulating and useful for generating reference points for their essay assignments, this data could get lost over time. A collective resource repository like Padlet or a VLE discussion forum would likely be more suited for this follow-up activity in future.

## **Evaluation**

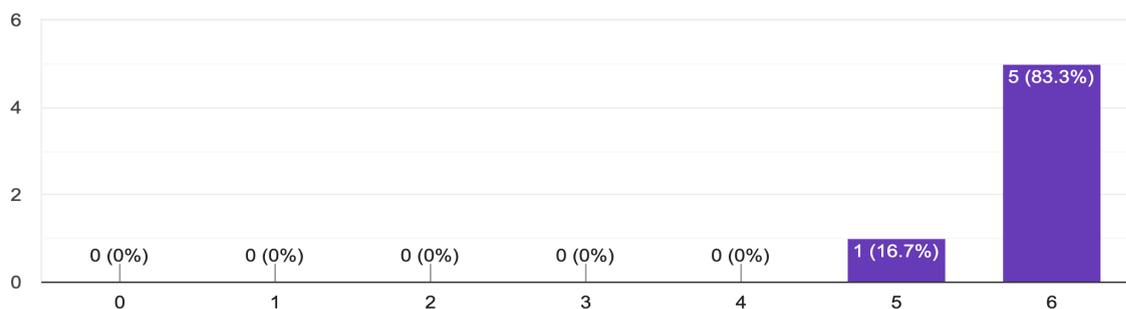
A teaching observation of my seminars concluded that I had succeeded in creating a welcoming atmosphere for dialogue, and that my motivational prompts served to encourage

students to have agency in the discussion and take ownership over the discourses from a perspective of personal relevance. However, they remarked that participation could be improved. In future, the interactive polling system Wooclap could present opportunities for active learning where students might be reluctant about speaking aloud (Khan, 2021; Abu Talib et al. 2021).

I used the questionnaire generator Google Forms to further assess the effectiveness of my teaching, by sharing a feedback questionnaire with students via email at the end of the seminar series. Only six out of eighteen students completed the questionnaire, which raises questions as to the reliability of the results, and whether the voices that are not represented here are precisely the ones that would be most relevant to this discussion.<sup>5</sup> The results are reproduced below:

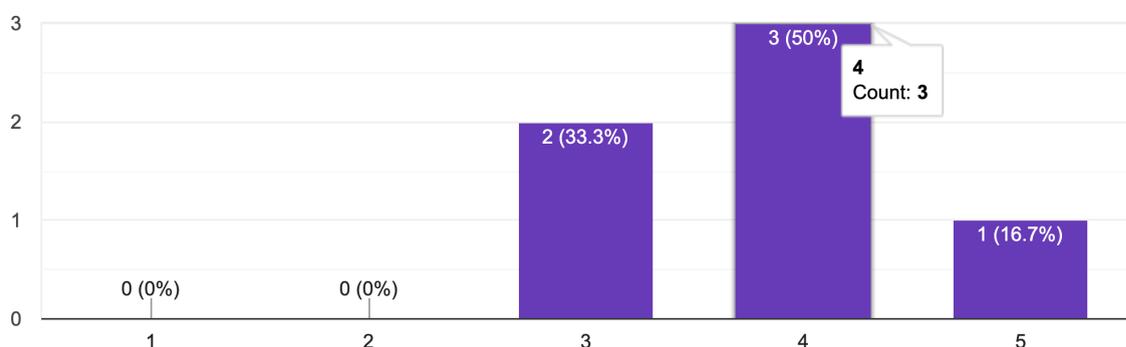
How many seminars did you attend in the Spring Term?

6 responses



Overall, on a scale of 1-5, how useful were the Critical Studies seminars to you?

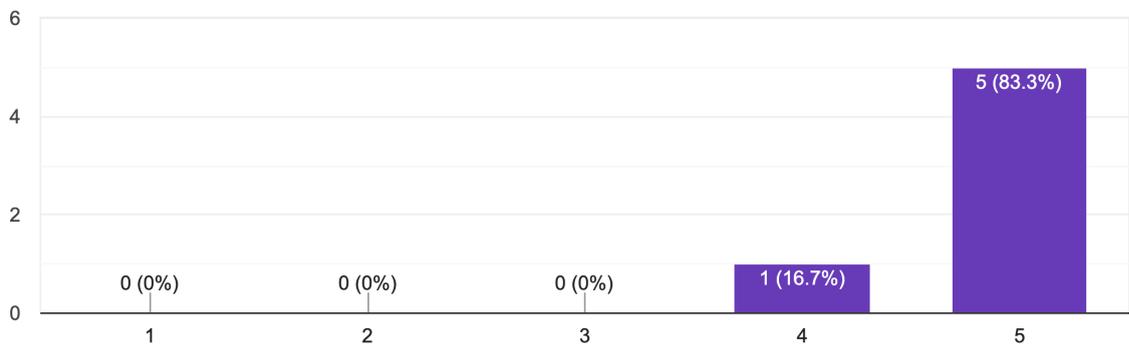
6 responses



<sup>5</sup> The questionnaire was sent out a month in advance of writing this essay. Next time I will reconsider the timing, as I shared the form whilst the students were still working towards an essay deadline and likely didn't feel they had the time to spare.

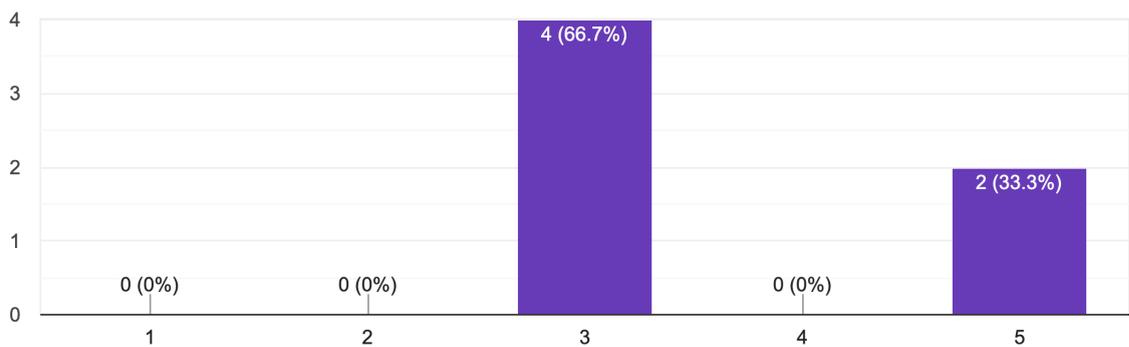
On a scale of 1-5, how included did you feel in the seminars?

6 responses



On a scale of 1-5, how much social cohesion was there in the group?

6 responses



If you have any further comments or feedback, please leave them below. Thanks!

2 responses

Katarina is an absolute class seminar leader; you always feel heard, and even what may appear to be a 'silly' comment, Katarina will pick it up and probe it without judgement.

I loved our group since we felt we were good friends and a lot of people got involved and Katarina, our seminar leader tried hard to get people to talk and be inclusive. What could improve I think is efficiency - if there was an agenda of seminal points to be discussed from each week's lecture it would have drawn more opinions from everyone.

According to these answers, the students seemed satisfied with their inclusion, but only felt somewhat connected to their peers. Other measures I have used to gauge the effectiveness of my teaching were attendance (students attended on average 4.6/6 seminars in the Spring Term) and assessment performance (students received on average 64.4% or a 2.1 on their

assessments in the Spring Term – an expected outcome in times of non-emergency). One thing to note is that three out of the four students who attended two or less seminars in the Spring Term were international students. Further research might indicate whether or not emergency remote learning might take a greater toll on international students or in some way exacerbate existing language barriers.

Given that the research discussed here suggests that greater student participation positively affects students engagement, I think that more interactivity could be incorporated into the seminar to diversify engagement and modes of communication (see Table 1), whilst still enacting sensitivity as to students’ unequal access to technology.

Level	Recommendation	Example strategies
Level 1	Effective delivery of content in synchronous mode	Screen sharing, class summaries, Q&A sessions
Level 2	Engagement with content in asynchronous mode	Materials on the LMS, class recordings on the LMS, reminders and announcements, group chat for Q&A
Level 3	Diversifying means of content provision	Content and interactions in various formats, case studies, online resources
Level 4	Providing and receiving feedback	Feedback from students and feedback for students
Level 5	Continuously clarifying requirements	Practice tests, checklists, and updated due dates
Level 6	Personalizing student-instructor interactions	Reachable for student queries, referring to students by their names
Level 7	Providing a space for student-student interactions	Students group chat
Level 8	Turning students into creators of content	Student presentations, students choose the content, materials, and delivery methods
Level 9	Content-related student-student interactions	Collaborative projects, presentations, exam preparation, moderation of discussion, peer review of work
Level 10	Personal student-student interactions	Ice breaking sessions, students profiles on the LMS

Table 1. Anon’s (2021) recommendations for effective student engagement strategies in emergency remote learning. I have been able to make use of all levels except Level 2 due to my teaching role, but in hindsight think I could have developed Level 3 more.

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