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- Games and Virtual Reality
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International Journal of Creative Multimedia

Building an In-Between Space for Digital Pedagogy

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Abstract

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, new and existing applications of digital technology in higher education have accelerated. Much recent writing around digital pedagogy conceptualises its affordances as a space rather than a tool. This paper presents a new digital pedagogy project, the Media & Communications Virtual Gallery, and considers how it makes use of those affordances for learning. The project is an online 3D, publicly accessible online gallery that houses a curated selection of student coursework. The objective of the project was to improve student engagement and visibility of student work. The gallery developed as an experiment towards this objective using digital technology in a way that did not simply replicate existing models. This paper elaborates on three key elements of digital space as they play out in the Virtual Gallery: authenticity, provocation, and play. Each element rests on the concept of the virtual as providing an ‘in-between’ zone, acting as both bridge and buffer between student experience inside a higher education institution and the wider world beyond. This small project indicates some promising developments and subjects for further consideration within a rapidly changing pedagogical practice.

Keywords Digital pedagogy; Affordance; Online learning; Digital media; Virtual space

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented many challenges to higher education, the long-term effects of which are still uncertain. Perhaps the most pressing issue for educators is how to effectively improve student engagement with the acceleration of digital technology in teaching, a trend broadly conceptualised as digital pedagogy (Vaataja and Ruokamo 2021). Promising experiments have used digital technology not to replace traditional lectures and seminars via video-conferencing software, but to embed virtual environments, gamification, and interactive technologies to enhance learning (Bilro et al 2022; Kim et al 2022; Lin et al 2022). A common theme in these projects is that networked technologies are conceived and practically applied as *spaces* rather than tools or functions.

This paper outlines another such experiment taking place at Coventry University. The Media & Communications Virtual Gallery is an online, publicly accessible 3D space that allows visitors to explore a curated selection of work made by undergraduate students. The gallery aims to utilise the affordances of digital technology in line with the aims of educators and to the benefit of students. After an overview of the gallery and its construction, I will draw on theories of digital pedagogy to propose three ways in which the immersive gallery presents opportunities as an effective learning environment: as an authentic space, as a provocative space, and as a playful space.

The Gallery

Media & Communications is not primarily a production-focused course. However, by design it does incorporate production elements into learning, particularly at the level of student coursework and outputs. For many modules this means that, in addition to academic essays, students may produce videos, audio pieces, graphic design, blogs, websites, animation, social media platforms, live events, and more. This course design provides both opportunities and challenges: how do we best teach students who may all be focusing on – and discovering – different production methods, research interests, professional skills, and subject specialisms within the wide remit of Media & Communications?

One response to this question is the Media & Communications Virtual Gallery. The project is created in Mozilla Hubs, a free and browser-based software for building virtual spaces. It can host images, videos, audio, 3D models, and links to other sites. The space is designed to

replicate a ‘real life’ gallery: the visitor assumes a first-person perspective; student work hangs on walls; the volume of any audio recordings will grow or shrink relative to the position of the visitor’s avatar. Multiple users can occupy the space and communicate via their avatars, using microphones, text, or by introducing 3D objects, emoticons, gifs, or a live feed of their own device camera.

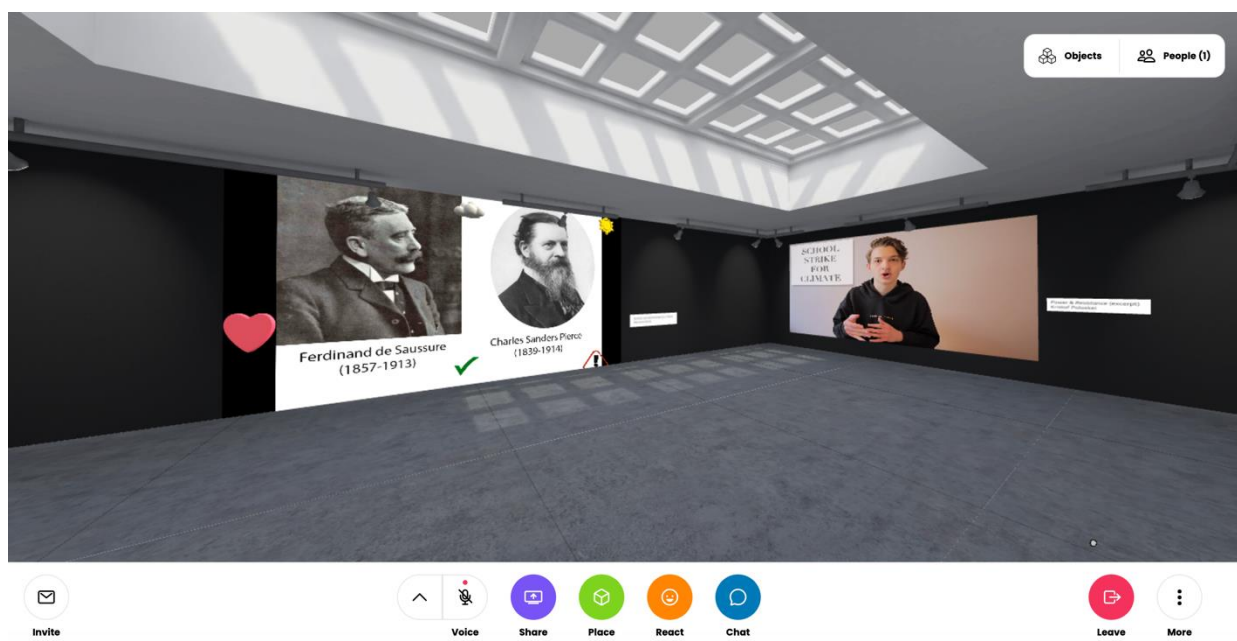


Figure 1 Two Student Video Essays in the Gallery as Seen by a Visitor (2022)

The work in the Gallery – all audio visual media including videos, posters, and audio excerpts – is displayed without reference to modules, assessments, or staff directives. The Gallery aims rather to focus attention on the work *as it stands*, blurring the boundary between higher education and the ‘real world’ beyond the classroom. In this way, it is an *authentic* space. The Gallery is situated as part of a network, with links to other parts of the Internet, including social media and students’ own websites. Discovery and appreciation of the work is non-linear and non-hierarchical; in this way, it is a *provocative* space. While rooted in the learning of the Media & Communications degree programme, the Gallery draws on skills and dispositions of social media in general. Students and visitors are encouraged to bridge the gap between academic rigour and the more free-form experimentation and interaction that exists across the Internet at large. In this sense, the Gallery is a *playful* space.

The rest of this paper will take each sense of space in turn, considering their affordances for digital pedagogy.

An Authentic Space

The Virtual Gallery mostly houses work that was created by students – in groups and as individuals – in response to one of various assignment briefs (though some work is extracurricular, created by students as part of their own separate media practice). Addressing students as both producers and consumers, this project aims to improve learner engagement. In tandem with the course design, this aims at Groccia's concept of authentic engagement: students participate in activities with a clear meaning and immediate value (2018).

In practical terms, this means recontextualising student work in a public, networked forum. When submitted to a lecturer as a coursework submission, a video essay can receive a very clear, if limited, *value* (i.e. a grade) but the *meaning* is perhaps not so clear. The sense of the work's quality is untethered from a useful context. When published online, on the other hand, the video acquires a surrounding framework that helps to make sense of it. The Virtual Gallery is neither a classroom wall, directed only at students and educators, nor a professional portfolio or YouTube channel amidst an ocean of online content. It is, instead, the space between these two contexts. The appearance of a literal gallery is replicated because it carries the implication of professional work that is worthy of attention and has cultural value.

The Virtual Gallery aims to achieve authentic engagement precisely *because* the content is presented without the prescriptive value that it receives as a piece of coursework (grades, feedback, commentary). Instead, the Gallery aims at a pedagogical realism (Villaroel et al 2018): how is the students' work linked not only to their module learning objectives, but to life and work beyond their classrooms? While authentic assessment is built into course design at Coventry University – indeed this principle is what produces such a varied corpus for Media & Communications – the Gallery assumes that coursework has a life *after* the point of submission.

With a heavy focus on assessment in compulsory, further, and higher education, it is easy for staff and students to prioritise grades, and to let this lens dominate any given coursework. While understandable, this approach limits the transformational potential of learning (Cheng 2011). Roulston and McCrindle (2018) make the case for amplifying the impact of learning by disseminating student outputs to an external audience. In stripping away some (but not all) of the coursework's academic context, the gallery aims to recover some of that potential. For example, Media & Communications students often make podcasts, which, unlike a written essay, is a

format ordinarily consumed not as a piece of academic work but casually among various other online media. Placing such a podcast in a gallery alongside posters, video essays, and design pieces makes the case to students that the assessment is a pretext for producing the work, and not the other way around.

Reflecting on their own projects of digital pedagogy, Winn and Lockwood (2019) identify the fundamental changes that digital technology has wrought on HE institutions and the educator-learner dynamic. The virtual gallery cautiously embraces these changes, taking small steps towards something resembling a more open and creative learning environment as described by the authors:

“In an anticipated environment where knowledge is free, the roles of the educator and the institution necessarily change. The educator is no longer a delivery vehicle and the institution becomes a landscape for the production of a mass intellect in commons, a porous, networked space of abundance, offering an experience that is in excess of what students might find elsewhere.”

(Winn and Lockwood, 2019: p. 229)

In considering the affordances of digital pedagogy, education is reconfigured from a directional relation (knowledge is transferred, skills are demonstrated) to a *spatial* one (knowledge is discovered, skills are practised). Yet this passage could well describe the Internet itself, a landscape that is much more ‘abundant’ than any one institution, or collection of institutions, could ever manage in terms of student experience. Our aim with the Gallery is to forge a route into this uncertain space: to identify the border between education and ‘real life’ as porous and networked. It is a matter not of bringing the web as a *technology* into HE learning, but rather of situating learning within the web as an enormous *environment*.

A Provocative Space

Any project of digital pedagogy needs to consider the importance of attention; digital media generally, and the Internet in particular, constitute a distractive environment. It is the job of educators to find strategies to manage their students’ attention according to the needs of the learning (Lin et al 2022). This has been a particular challenge for those learning strategies that aim to replicate traditional learning, such as video lectures and hybrid teaching (Aagaard 2022;

Alsuwaida 2022). What are the opportunities and challenges for the Virtual Gallery in the face of this dynamic?

As described above, the Gallery is designed as a networked space, bridging the gap from the students' digital experience of their curriculum and their digital media use at large. It therefore makes space for *social presence*, defined by Garrison (2017) as the ability of participants to identify with their community and communicate in a way that is purposeful, trusting, and representative of individual personalities. Gallery presentation can make more sense of assessment by way of media artefacts; the style of a video modelled on YouTube conventions is difficult to parse if it will not find a public platform that bridges social media and university modes of engagement. Such assessment asks students to consider, draw on and deploy their own personalities and connections, as they would in both professional and personal lives. The Gallery creates (virtual) space for that.

Facing the daunting task of corralling student attention online, then, the aim is to reshape how students see their own and each other's work by pushing it beyond the classroom. Useful here is Sadler's conception of 'knowing to': the *sense* of a work's quality and potential improvement that is learned by experience (2013). Students are producers and consumers before they arrive at university and will remain so after; at least some of the work they create at university will be expected to stand apart from how it is assessed. Publishing that work in a bespoke space asks visitors to make value judgments, with the implication that these judgements (of potential employers, prospective students, or anonymous users) are worthwhile. Then, creating *for* such a space as well as the grade, students should develop their own capacities for 'knowing to': what will this piece look like alongside others, on the wall of a networked gallery?

In researching the architecture of online networks, Ünluşoy et al. (2021) outline four key affordances, the most pertinent of which here is flexibility: networks exist in a multi-directional dynamic where curation and discovery take the place of linear knowledge digestion. The implication for learning is potentially profound, though as the authors note it is difficult to square with a pedagogy that is reverse engineered from a single endpoint, such as qualifying for one or a handful of professional careers. Media & Communications is well positioned to take advantage of networked learning: to the extent that it prepares students for labour it does so for a massive variety of sectors, contexts, and technologies – some of which are unknown.

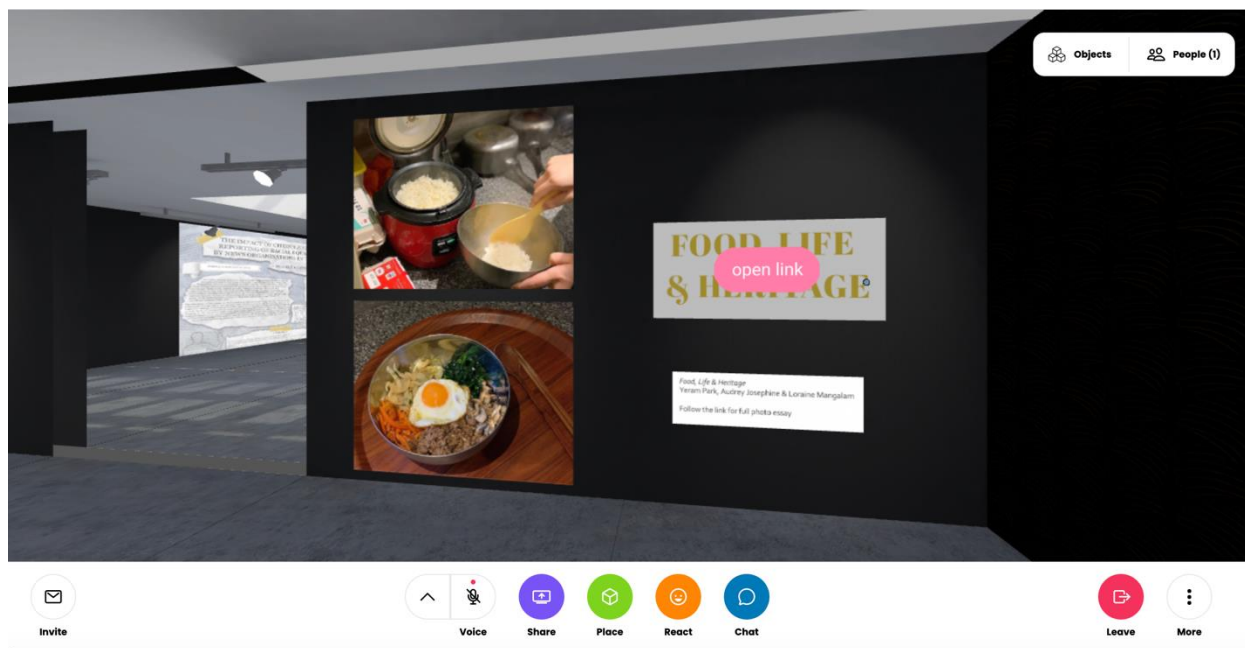


Figure 2 Images from a Photo Essay on the Gallery Wall. The Link Takes Visitors to the Students' Own Website with the Full Project (2022)

Visitors to the Gallery – included those who have produced its artefacts – are provoked to discover without a hierarchy of work or a clear path. Many works are short excerpts or snapshots, with links to other sites; navigating the space requires a process of curation from the visitor. The space therefore asks students to consider the quality of the work in the context of the Internet at large, and acts as a node around which students develop an interactive mode of engagement, with active exchange taking the place of passive consumptions (Chi and Wylie 2014). This affordance is further exploited with the use of social media to promote and link to the Gallery.

A Playful Space

In assessing a range of case studies, Gallou and Abrahams also conceptualise digital technology as providing a *space* for active learning (2018). Particularly when used as a tool for realising public engagement – as with the Virtual Gallery – networked technology has the potential to transform roles in learning, where students create rather than consume knowledge. The authors claim that this role exchange is best realised when the technology is deployed as an ‘in-between’ zone: it is an incubator between different stages of learning, disciplines, and levels of the curriculum. I would add to this, reflecting the affordances of the Virtual Gallery elaborated above, that online networks can also bridge the curriculum and life beyond it.

Such an in-between zone is well suited to play and experimentation. Work from the curriculum, produced to specific briefs, is recontextualised not only by the space but also by the way users interact with it. Though broadly the user experience of the Gallery is a ‘realistic’ analogue to a real-life space, it also encourages playful interaction as a unique affordance of the network. Visitors can generate not only 3D emoticons in the space but also floating gifs, deploying the pop culture signifiers that constitute the heavily referential, mimetic language of the Internet (Davison 2012). Visitors can also scrawl 3D doodles anywhere in the space with a colourful pen, spawn 3D models from a library, and activate a flight mode in order to move through walls and ceilings or view the work from an otherwise impossible angle.

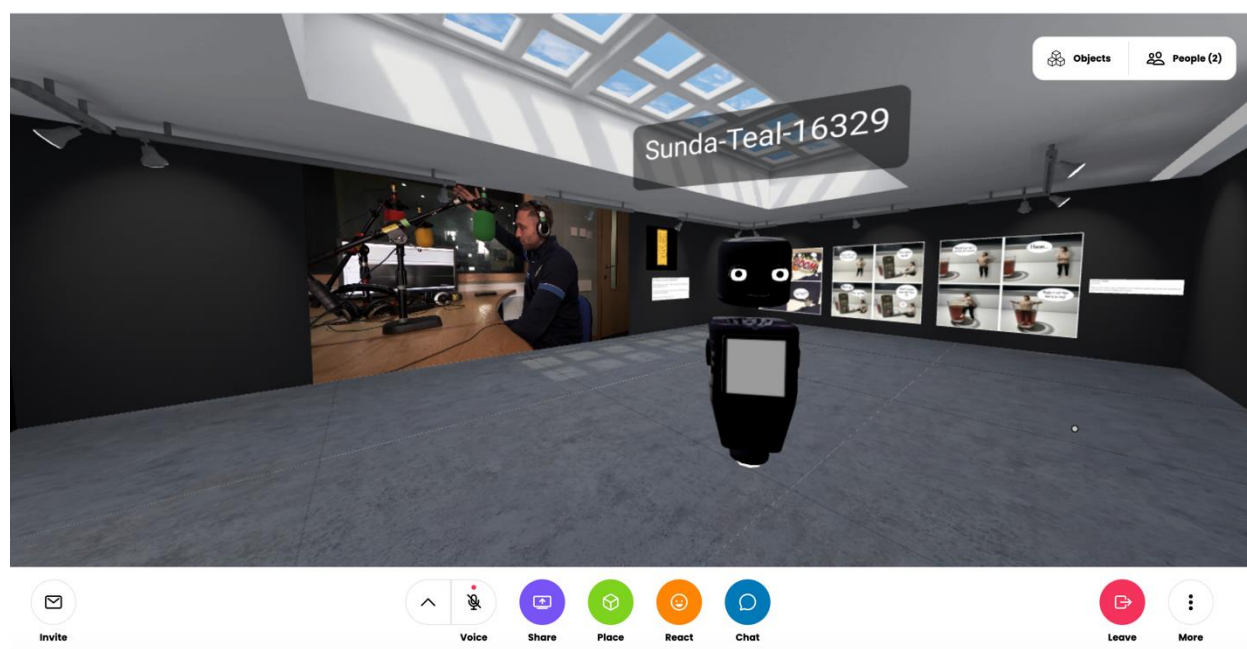


Figure 3 A Visitor Avatar in the Virtual Gallery (2022)

These design elements are, pointedly, not directives; just as the work is untethered from assessment, use of the Gallery is not contained to the more rigid or hierarchical dynamics of the HE institution. Moreover, the Virtual Gallery’s realistic design is not inevitable or obligatory. Mozilla Hubs allows for expansive play with scale, so that a student’s video could appear to the user as a 20-storey building, or photographs could take the form of floor tiles or sides of an immersive container. The ambition of incorporating playful elements is precisely to pitch the gallery as in-between zone: it is free from the limitations of the classroom, yet still identified as belonging to a HE institution and so separate from the more high-stakes professional world. It therefore aims at manifesting a zone of proximal development: a space that links the familiar and

unknown, with a licence of autonomy in order to accrue new skills or knowledge (Vygotsky 1978).

Building a space to house coursework is broadly a way to recognise and cultivate learning beyond the point of assessment. McDougall and Potter note that the skills and dispositions that imbue digital media are precisely those that educators should be trying to teach: mimesis, transgression, and self-reflection (2015). This kind of learning requires movement beyond the sort of one-way knowledge flow that dominates a more outdated concept of higher education in the arts and humanities. Instead, students apply the same technologies, skills, and dispositions in social, educational, and professional lives, because the online network spans all three.

McDougall and Potter also describe digital pedagogy space as ‘in between’ – an opportunity to cultivate discovery, curation, and creativity. The Virtual Gallery allows for such experimentation precisely because it is about the playful recontextualization of work. There is no limit to the rooms of the Gallery, which over the development of a cohort or an entire course build an iterative process of self-reflection.

Summary

Though a small and young project, the Media & Communications Virtual Gallery is an attempt to build the pedagogical concept of an ‘in between’ learning space that makes best use of the affordances of digital media. In between the curriculum and the wider world, it is a space to find authentic learning and application for student work. In between the digital architecture of Coventry University and the wider Internet landscape, it is a space to enact the logic of networks and their challenge to power relations. In between established conventions and new experimentation, it is also a space for creative play and acquisition of novel skills and dispositions.

Partly due to the relatively horizontal nature of networks, an effective digital pedagogy must account for and elevate the perspective of students as well as educators (Väättäjä and Ruokamo 2021). The Media & Communications teaching team, then, has also established a working group of undergraduate students who, together with staff, oversee curation, design, and promotion of the gallery through social media. As well as developing the space itself, these

students acquire relevant professional experience alongside their studies. Moving forward, we are identifying opportunities to grow the gallery with input from postgraduate students, other courses, and regional and international partner organisations.

The Virtual Gallery will not replace any other part of higher education learning. It is, rather, designed to stand alongside that learning, at its periphery. It asks what is uniquely possible at that periphery, and tests the permeability of the often-invoked boundary between universities and the 'real world'. It is well suited, therefore, to experiment and to build effective learning that both complements and expands the goals of the institution.

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