

'Digital Sketchbooks': using iPads to support school visits to the Ashmolean Museum

A messy problem for Art and Design students

Art and Design remains an integral part of the secondary curriculum, and many schools visit local galleries and museums to provide their students with inspiration. Indeed, the Education Department at the Ashmolean Museum welcomes thousands of students each year.

Students commonly make drawings of the artefacts in the museum on such visits, but the gallery environment limits the range of techniques they can use. However, the versatile apps now available on tablets can overcome some of these hurdles. For example, students can use them to capture and edit photos, create 3D images and short animations, and draw with the digital equivalents of messy materials such as paint and charcoal.

In conversations with local art teachers, staff in the Education Department discovered that many struggle to incorporate emerging technologies into classroom practice. Having received 12 iPads for use in teaching, they therefore spotted an opportunity to support Art and Design students visiting the museum. Through the Digital Sketchbooks project they set out to create an online handbook for teachers demonstrating how tablets can enhance a museum visit. The resource would be video-based and include tutorials, ideas, tips and examples of students' actual work.

Researching the existing landscape

Before designing the online handbook, the Ashmolean staff ran a consultation in conjunction with Oxford Art Teach (OAT), to gain a greater understanding of the current use of tablets in classrooms. Since OAT's focus theme at the time was digital technologies, interest in the project was generally high. However, some teachers felt unsure of the value of technology or unconfident about using it, or wanted guidance on apps and lesson plans.

In collaboration with teachers at one school, Ashmolean staff developed a series of workshops for students on three free apps: Pic Collage, Brushes 3 and 123D Catch. These apps were selected because they offered a range of opportunities, including sketchbook research, collage, photography, drawing and painting, and 3D modelling.

The workshops were then delivered to Year 9 and Year 12 art students at the Ashmolean and filmed by the University's Media Production Unit. The footage was supplemented through interviews and a follow-up visit to the school, and a series of video tutorials was



Figure 1 Museum staff created a series of short instructional videos



Figure 2 A student's work using the Brushes 3 app.

produced addressing some of the issues raised during the consultation. The videos, together with supporting information (in PDF format) about the apps featured and examples of students' work, formed the basis of an online learning package that was launched in August 2014. In addition, the Media Production Unit uploaded the videos to iTunesU in order to reach a wider audience.

Inspired students, inspired teachers

The Digital Sketchbooks project proved very popular with staff and students alike. Throughout the video-recorded workshops students (particularly boys) were engaged in annotating, photographing, drawing and editing, and in searching the Web to extend their research. They expressed delight at the designs they created, and two-thirds said they would visit the museum again. Positive feedback from the teachers involved includes: *Students ... had clear guidance and inspiration for what was required. The weakest students had something to do rather than just wandering round not taking in the information. Using the iPads made them excited and even more positive about the whole trip.*

The online resources have notched up an impressive tally of statistics:

- Over 40,000 downloads or views on iTunesU
- Over than 2,000 views of the learning package on the Ashmolean website
- Over 3,000 downloads of the PDF documents from the learning package

The video tutorials have also been promoted by the National Society for Education in Art and Design.

Lessons learnt

Learning was not limited to the students! Helen Ward, Deputy Head of Education at the Ashmolean, offers the following advice:

Filming workshops with the students

- Trial the workshops before filming them.
- Precede each workshop with warm-up exercises to build students' confidence when speaking on camera.
- If the budget allows, outsource filming and editing so that the project can be finished more quickly.
- Upload the finished product to iTunesU in order to reach a larger audience.

Working with schools

- Choose simple apps that do not require internet access; they are more reliable and keep students focused on the museum's own collection.
- Teachers are overwhelmed by the number of apps available, so provide them with recommendations and examples of use.
- Use a stylus with drawing apps; this helps students and protects the screens.
- Don't underestimate the time needed to maintain the museum's iPads, including storing and sharing students' work.

Further information

- The online learning package produced by the Digital Sketchbooks project is available on [the Ashmolean website](#).

- You can watch the video-recording of a lightning talk about the project given at [the Oxford ASPIRE staff conference](#).
- The [Educational Media Unit](#) in IT Services offers digital video production and editing services.



Winner, OxTALENT 2015 award for academic podcasting. The text and images in this case study have been adapted from Helen Ward's entry for the OxTALENT competition.

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