

Building Online Learning Experiences at an Art School

by Scout Stevenson

One of the biggest challenges for those who design and develop online learning experiences is creating an online experience that mirrors the best of what happens in an institution's classrooms.

Lectures and videos have been fairly simple to convert into online learning and are a staple of hundreds of online courses. But what about, say, an art class where much of the real learning takes place when instructors and peers provide live critiques of each student's work? Think laser pointers, running commentaries, annotations, and lively discussions about not only the techniques but the artist's intentions and inspiration. At least 50 percent of a college art class is spent performing critiques. How do you make that work online?

Where are the limits of online learning? Are they real?

This question isn't just one for art schools. Many areas of study are best learned via pedagogies other than lecturing and testing. Take Harvard Business School's case study methodology, for example. Or immersing students into a study environment, which is a standard approach for urban planning.

We recently had the opportunity to tackle the question of how to make such a translation for a **leading art school** who wanted to offer their degree programs online. The school was eager to expand its student reach beyond its physical campus, but wasn't willing to compromise on the learning experience, its "special sauce", which included the critiques so essential to student learning. They wanted their online students to participate in the same critique experience as their on-campus students.

At this point, most institutions would shrug their shoulders and drop the idea, resigned that the in-class critiquing process at the heart of art school pedagogy would not be possible in a digital environment. After all, won't there always be limits as to what online technologies can deliver?

This institution, however, remained open to possibility. We were convinced that we could deliver an online critique experience that was as dynamic and effective as the one classroom students were enjoying. Our vision of what might be possible was compelling enough for the school to commit to going where no art school had gone before and engage us to bring it to life.

Defining the leading edge

Achieving the vision was an ambitious stretch, but just the kind we most love to make. We started as we do most projects, with a process to better understand what would produce the best learning outcomes. We studied the individual elements that characterize the best

classroom critique sessions, and we created learner personas to guide us in recreating this experience online.

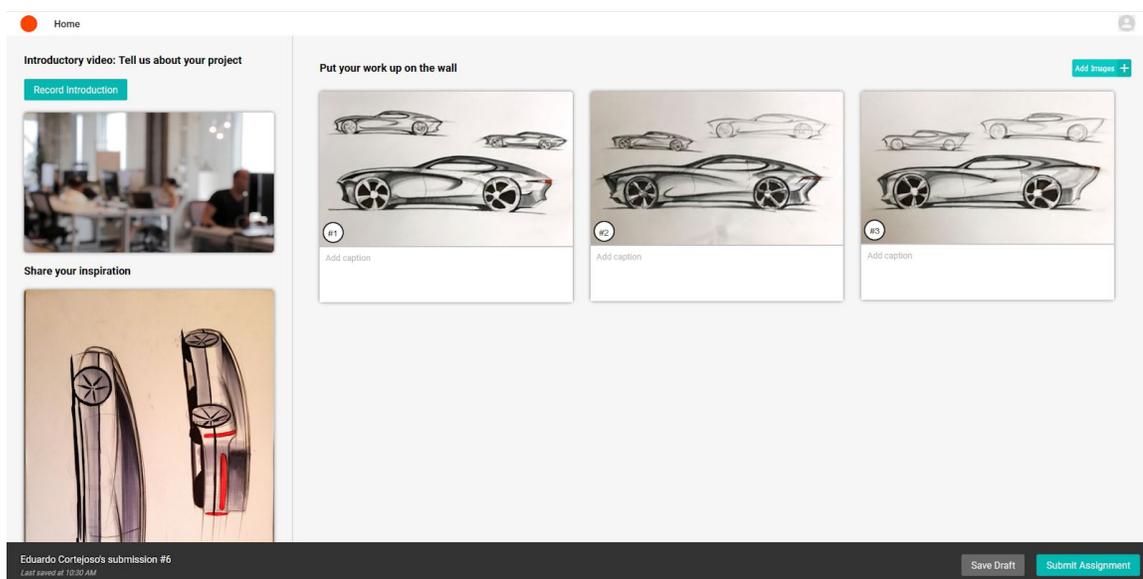
Next we needed to see how others were approaching the problem. We spent weeks surveying and assessing currently available critiquing, annotation and portfolio tools and paradigms, asking: What worked? What didn't? What was awkward? What was missing? Some that we thought were interesting included Google Docs, InVision, VoiceThread, Pathbright, Critiquelt, Evernote, Khan Academy, Zoom and many more.

By the end of our research, it was obvious to us that the tools currently available fell short of the school's vision, and no matter how much we tweaked and twisted the code to bend them to our will, they were not going to deliver the distinctive experience of an in-class critique. The school would need us to build a customized experience from scratch, what we've been calling the Critique Tool.

Bringing the vision to life

Some months later, I have to say that I'm very proud of the Critique Tool and of the new ground we have broken in achieving our mission. To get a feel for some of the highlights, think about what happens in an art class:

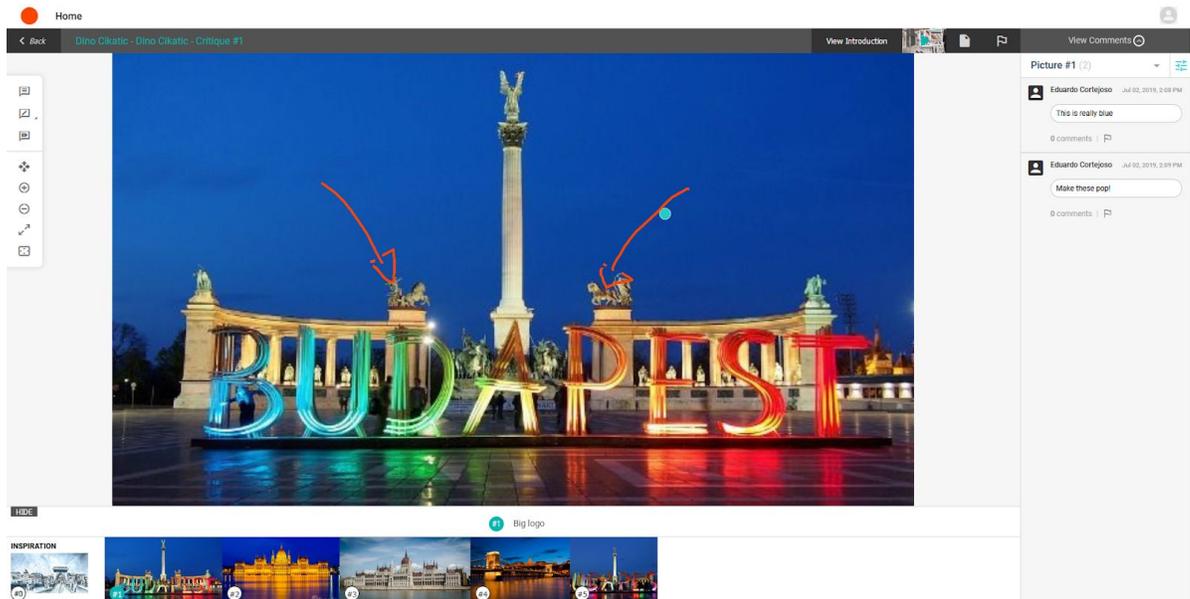
- A classroom critique might begin with the student projecting or pinning their work up for all to see while talking through their approach to the assignment and the inspiration behind it.



Likewise, our online critique process begins when the student uploads the work for all to see and records a video explaining their approach to the assignment plus an image of

the inspiration.

- In a classroom, participants might then use a laser pointer, mouse, stickies, gestures or even rearrange the work to point out areas of discussion: a line there, some shading there, or shift in composition perhaps.

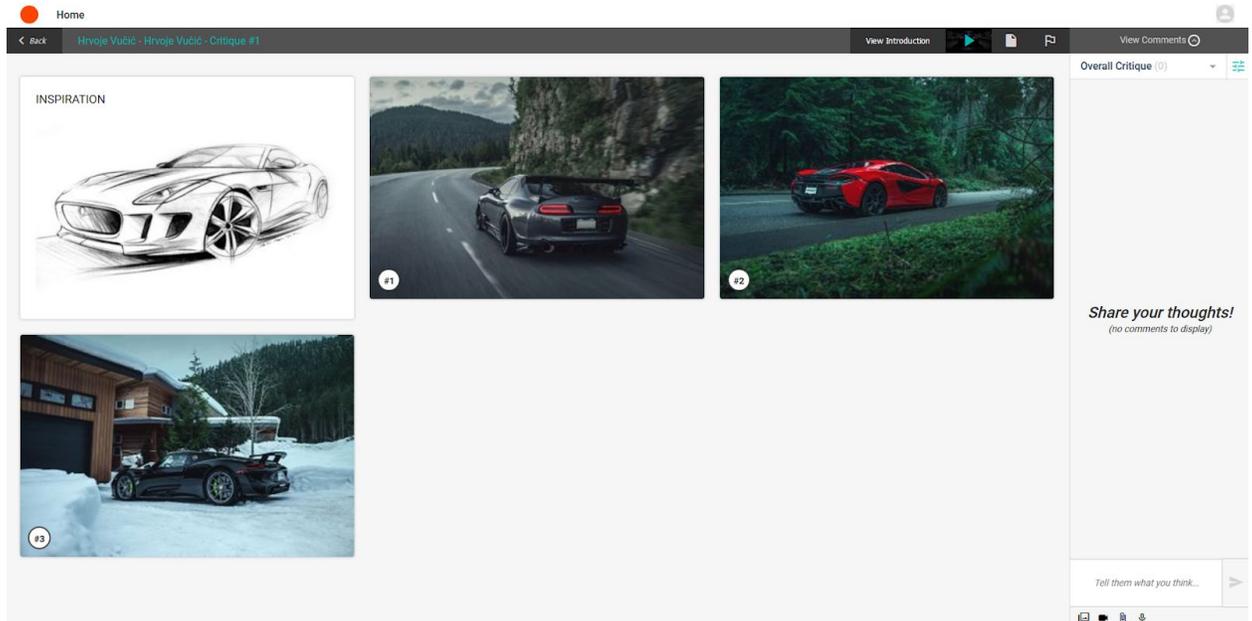


The online version supplies them with digital pins, drawing tools, pointers and annotations that can draw attention to areas of discussion, tying them to comment threads where they can make their remarks.

- During a classroom critique, the group may talk for some time about what's good, what needs work, and suggestions for improvement, going into as much detail as is needed to get across the relevant points.

The Critique Tool enables both teachers and peer reviewers to record videos of themselves making these same points. The video not only shows the reviewer's face, but also annotations — circles and arrows and such — that they make on the artwork as they talk. This feature allows reviewers to provide far more depth and detail than would be possible using comment threads.

- A classroom critique is likely to include some back-and-forth discussion between the student and the teacher, and among fellow students.



The online version allows multiple people to conduct both video and text reviews. Each includes a robust set commenting tools designed to support lively discussions over multiple threads.

In short, virtually everything that occurs face-to-face in a brick and mortar art classroom has been replicated in this new online critique tool.

There is much more to the project, of course. Our involvement includes building complete courses that lead to the same art degrees that their on-campus students earn. But it is the critique tool that has broken the new ground necessary for great art education to be possible online. The result is a program that combines the best of what both digital and classroom learning have to offer.

Evolution and online learning

This is how online education evolves. An institution with a distinctive pedagogy asks, 'Why couldn't this be done online?' — and then tasks creative experts to come up with a way to make it so.

All it takes is a vision, plus the commitment to providing the necessary time and support to make it a reality. We received that from this art institution, and we think the results speak for themselves.

