

I wish to thank the AASA for the invitation to participate in this webinar, and Mohammed for the introduction and facilitation. It's a real privilege to be part of this conversation.

The title of my presentation references Lindy Osborne and Philip Crowther's 2011 paper on the crit, titled '*Butterpaper, sweat and tears, the affective dimension of engaging students during the architectural critique*'. This slide presentation contains the visuals that I used for the webinar, with a summary of the main points that I made – and some that I omitted. In line with the flexible, blended and hybrid nature of the topic, I've added some reflections on and insights from the webinar conversation, at the end.

From Butterpaper to Touch Screen

The Online Desk Crit and the Spaces Between

Jolanda Morkel Cape Peninsula University of Technology



**AASA Webinar #3:
Maintaining Studio Culture in Online Learning_May 15th 2020**



I wish to share the main insights that I've gained from my research, experiences and experiments with the online desk crit in the last decade or so. I will describe the context of the online desk crit and how it developed at my University, followed by an overview of some of the discoveries that we made.

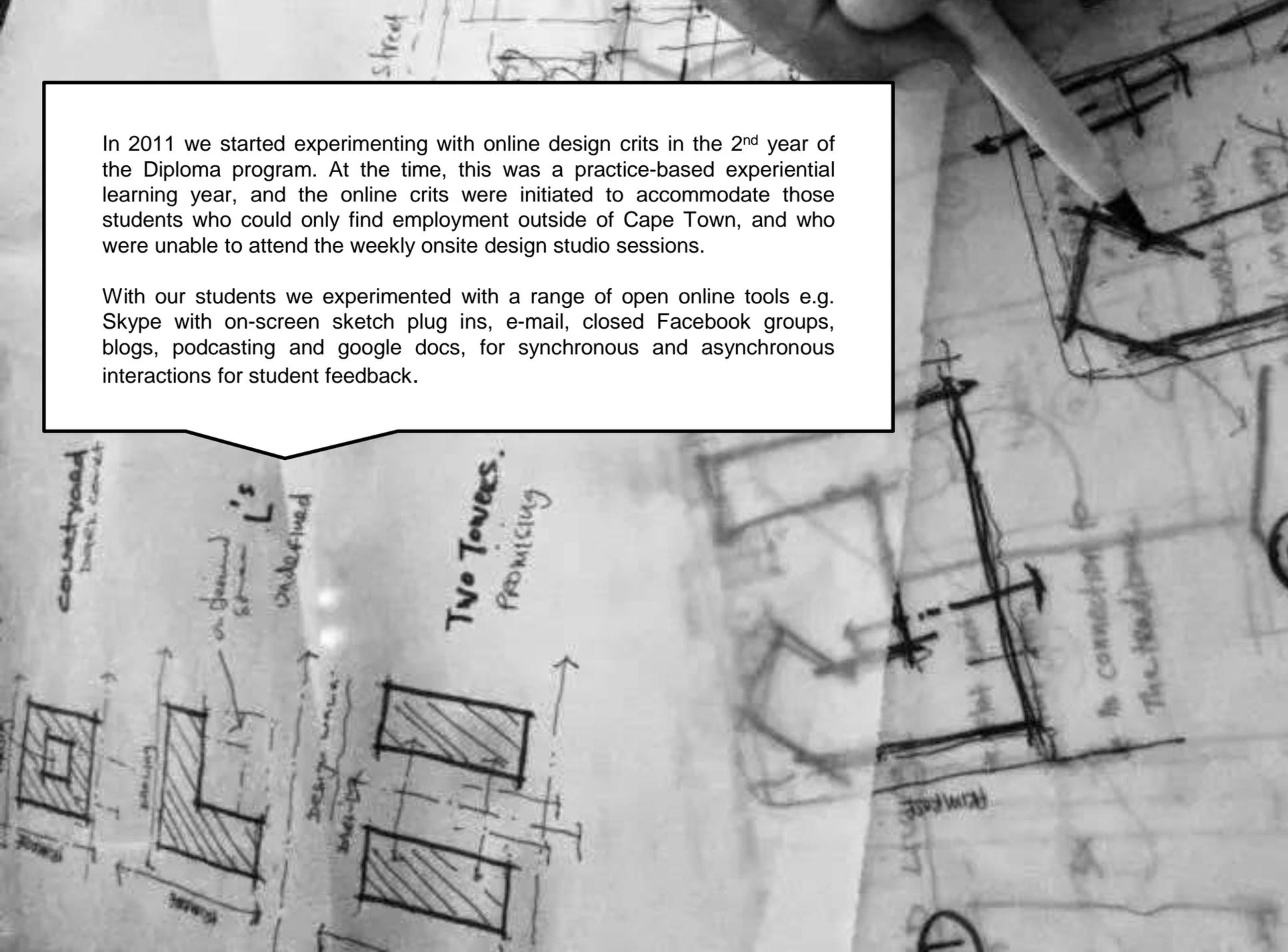
Our campus is housed on the Cape Town foreshore, the second building from the left on the image below. We have 20 full-time academic staff and 450 students, forming part of a total CPUT student population of around 32 000, spread over six campuses.



Department of Architectural Technology and Interior Design
Cape Peninsula University of Technology CAPE TOWN

In 2011 we started experimenting with online design crits in the 2nd year of the Diploma program. At the time, this was a practice-based experiential learning year, and the online crits were initiated to accommodate those students who could only find employment outside of Cape Town, and who were unable to attend the weekly onsite design studio sessions.

With our students we experimented with a range of open online tools e.g. Skype with on-screen sketch plug ins, e-mail, closed Facebook groups, blogs, podcasting and google docs, for synchronous and asynchronous interactions for student feedback.





Open Architecture - SAIA's Success Story



Kyk later

Deel

In 2014 we implemented a part-time Bachelors in Technology (or BTech) program, that is the final year of the Bachelors qualification, following on the Diploma.

This program was offered part-time over two years in collaboration with Open Architecture, a non-profit unit established by the South African Institute of Architects (SAIA) to support the transformation of the architectural profession, accommodating non-traditional and mature students.

Building on the 2nd year experiment, this blend comprised online learning, office-based mentoring and occasional on-campus blocks. The online desk crit that I describe in this presentation, forms part of this blended model. This crit is used in conjunction with online student journaling for asynchronous written and sketch feedback, as well as onsite physical desk crits in the workplace, and during on-campus block sessions. The project was successfully concluded at the end of last year and Open Architecture moved on to support other schools of architecture, to set up remote emergency learning and teaching strategies.

At the start of this year, further building on these experiences, CPUT implemented new part-time blended Advanced Diploma programs in Architectural Technology and Interior Design.

The desk crit is a well-established studio practice. It forms the core of the educational experience for students and the largest proportion of contact teaching hours. Until Sarah Dinham's 1987 study there was no published research literature on desk crit teaching.

Not only is the desk crit associated with the mastery of design expertise under the guidance of a design tutor, that's often a practicing architect, but it also forms part of the process of acculturation of students into the architectural profession. Although it is a celebrated 'ritual', in its traditional form it hasn't escaped scrutiny. For example, the literature highlights asymmetrical power relations, student stress and mental health concerns.

'The desk crit is a brief event occurring repeatedly throughout an afternoon. Typically, the critic moves through the studio in a random or sometimes an informal 'appointment' basis, meeting with students at their desks and discussing their thinking, their work, their progress and theory problems with the project assignment.

Studio instructors might meet with as few as five or as many as all 15 of the students in 'their' studios ...

Altogether a student has the undivided attention of a studio teacher for – on the average – 30 minutes per week, probably in two 15-minute segments.'

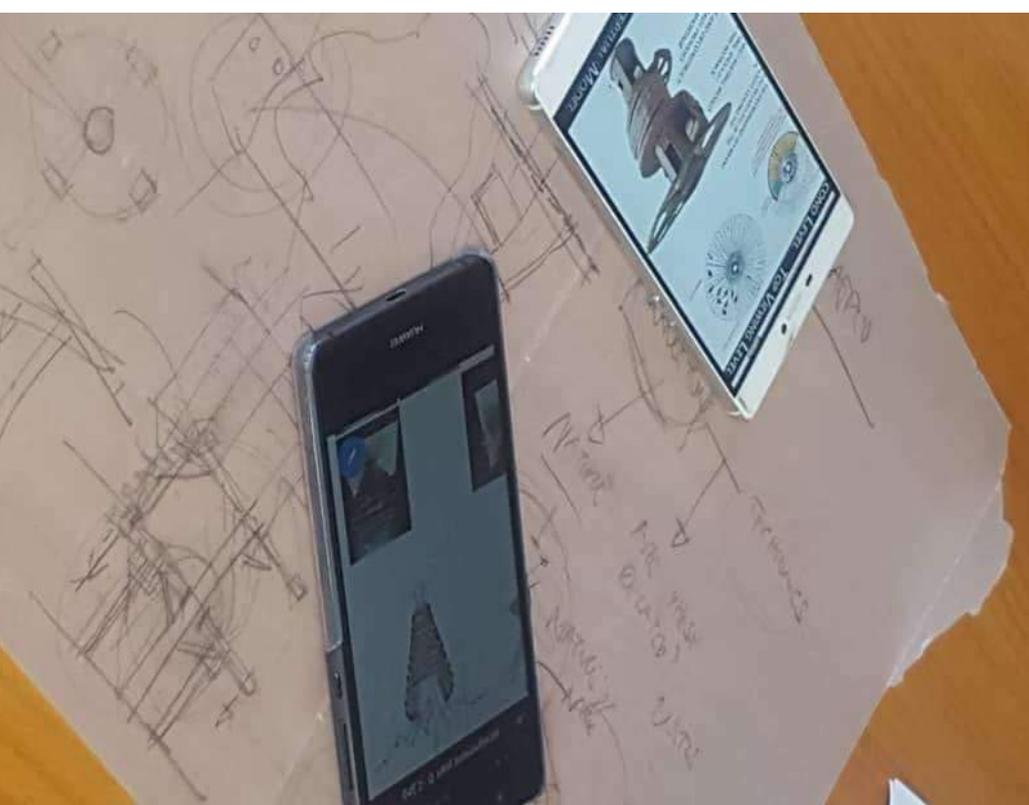
(Kasparowitz, cited in Dinham 1987)

Let's fast forward 30 years... and ask ourselves what has changed? We see more students, and more diverse student groups, and we see fewer design tutors in relation to student numbers...



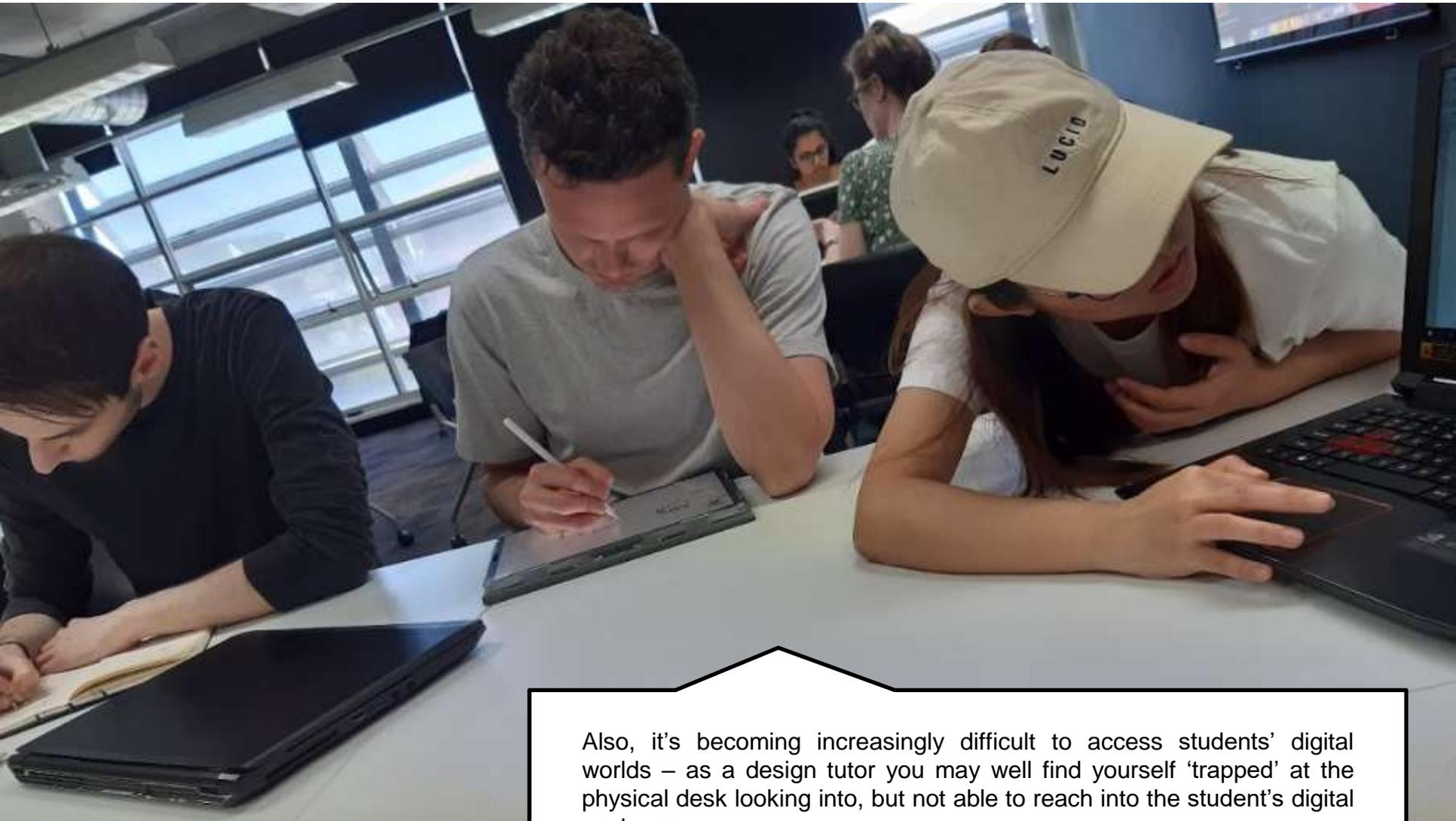
And we see screens... many screens,
and always at arms' length...



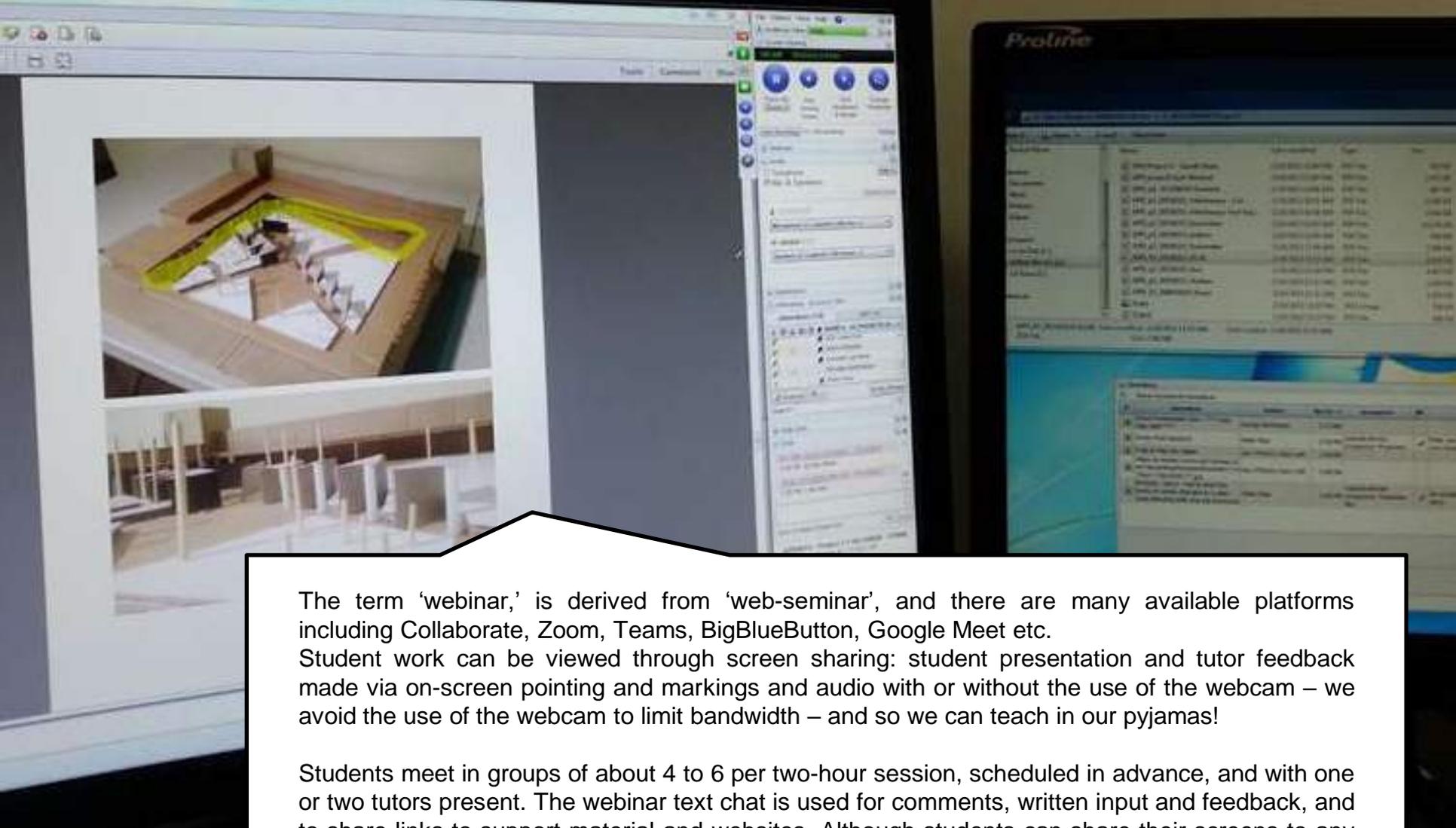


...and even where printing on paper falls short... it's mobile to the rescue!





Also, it's becoming increasingly difficult to access students' digital worlds – as a design tutor you may well find yourself 'trapped' at the physical desk looking into, but not able to reach into the student's digital work space.



The term 'webinar,' is derived from 'web-seminar', and there are many available platforms including Collaborate, Zoom, Teams, BigBlueButton, Google Meet etc. Student work can be viewed through screen sharing: student presentation and tutor feedback made via on-screen pointing and markings and audio with or without the use of the webcam – we avoid the use of the webcam to limit bandwidth – and so we can teach in our pyjamas!

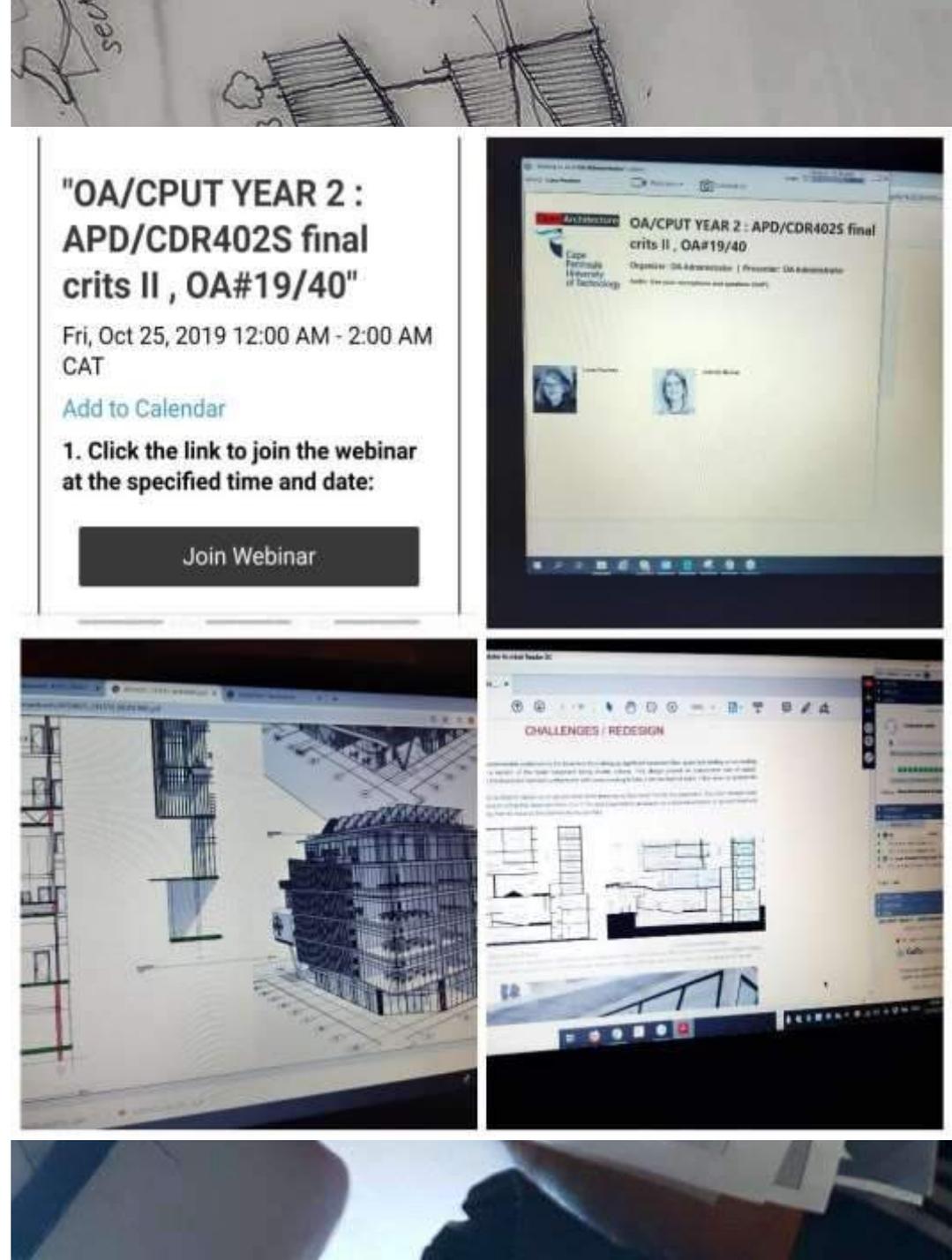
Students meet in groups of about 4 to 6 per two-hour session, scheduled in advance, and with one or two tutors present. The webinar text chat is used for comments, written input and feedback, and to share links to support material and websites. Although students can share their screens to any application, and collaborative tools like conceptboard can be used, most of the time we use pdfs navigated by the tutor. The online desk crits can be recorded and revisited. It is helpful to have at least one additional screen to view students' drawings, to participate in the text chat, and for access to parallel communication channels.

The online desk crit is...

1. Internet-reliant

It goes without saying that power and internet connectivity are critical requirements to run an online desk crit. It is therefore important to first establish that all students can access the online space. If not, perhaps consider as alternative, asynchronous feedback, text-based or podcasting.

We've had to schedule online desk crits at midnight to accommodate students' power and internet availability, for example for students in Zimbabwe.

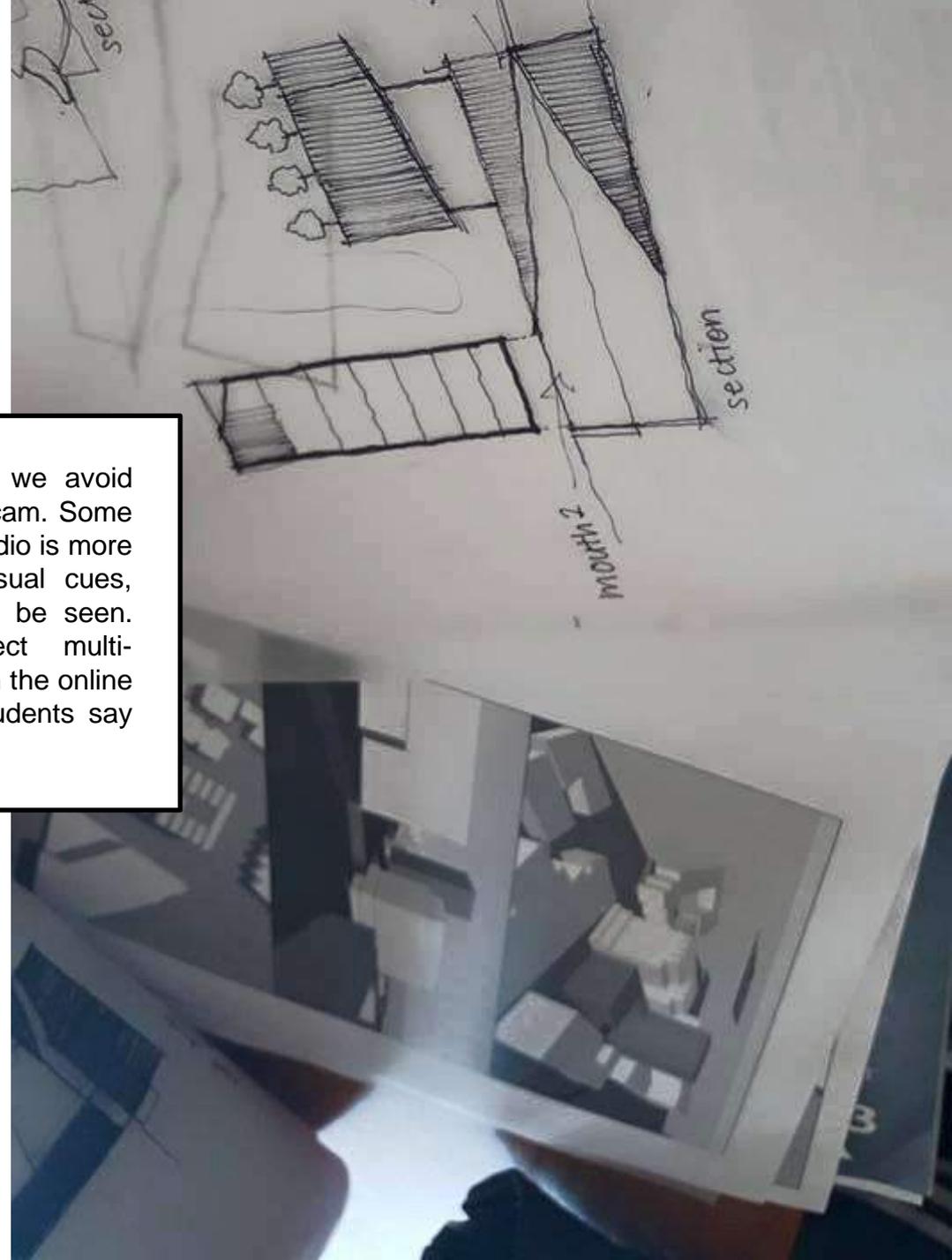


The online desk crit is...

1. Internet-reliant

2. Participant-invisible

To limit bandwidth we avoid the use of the webcam. Some students feel the audio is more focused without visual cues, other prefer not to be seen. One would expect multi-tasking to happen in the online crit setting. Yet, students say it's not the case.



The online desk crit is...

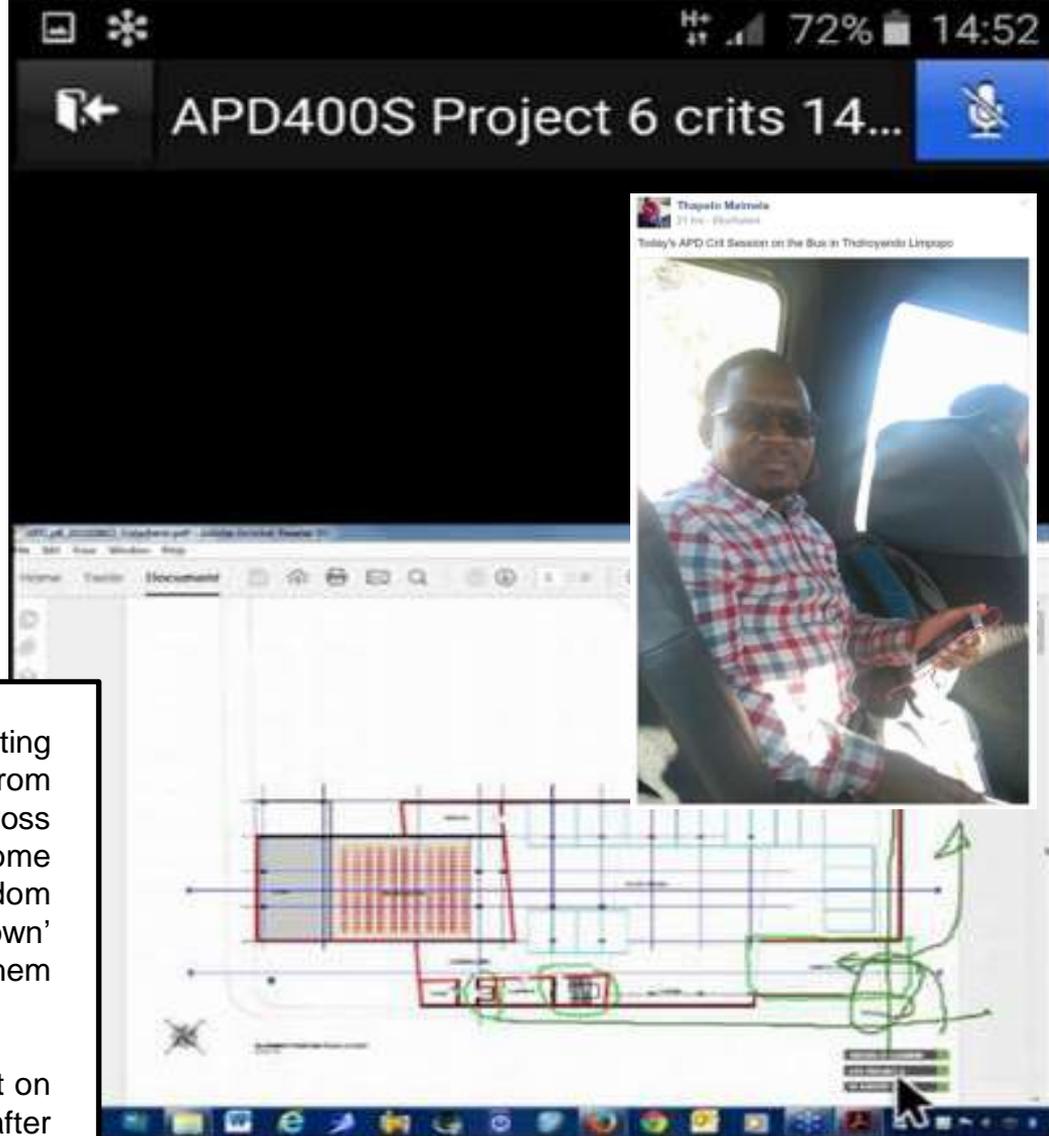
1. Internet-reliant

2. Participant-invisible

3. Ubiquitous

Students, tutors and visiting experts can join the crit from different locations and across different time zones. Some students say that the freedom to choose and their 'own' physical space makes them feel more 'at ease'.

This example is of a student on his way to the airport after visiting a construction site, engaging with an online desk crit via his mobile phone.



The online desk crit is...

1. Internet-reliant

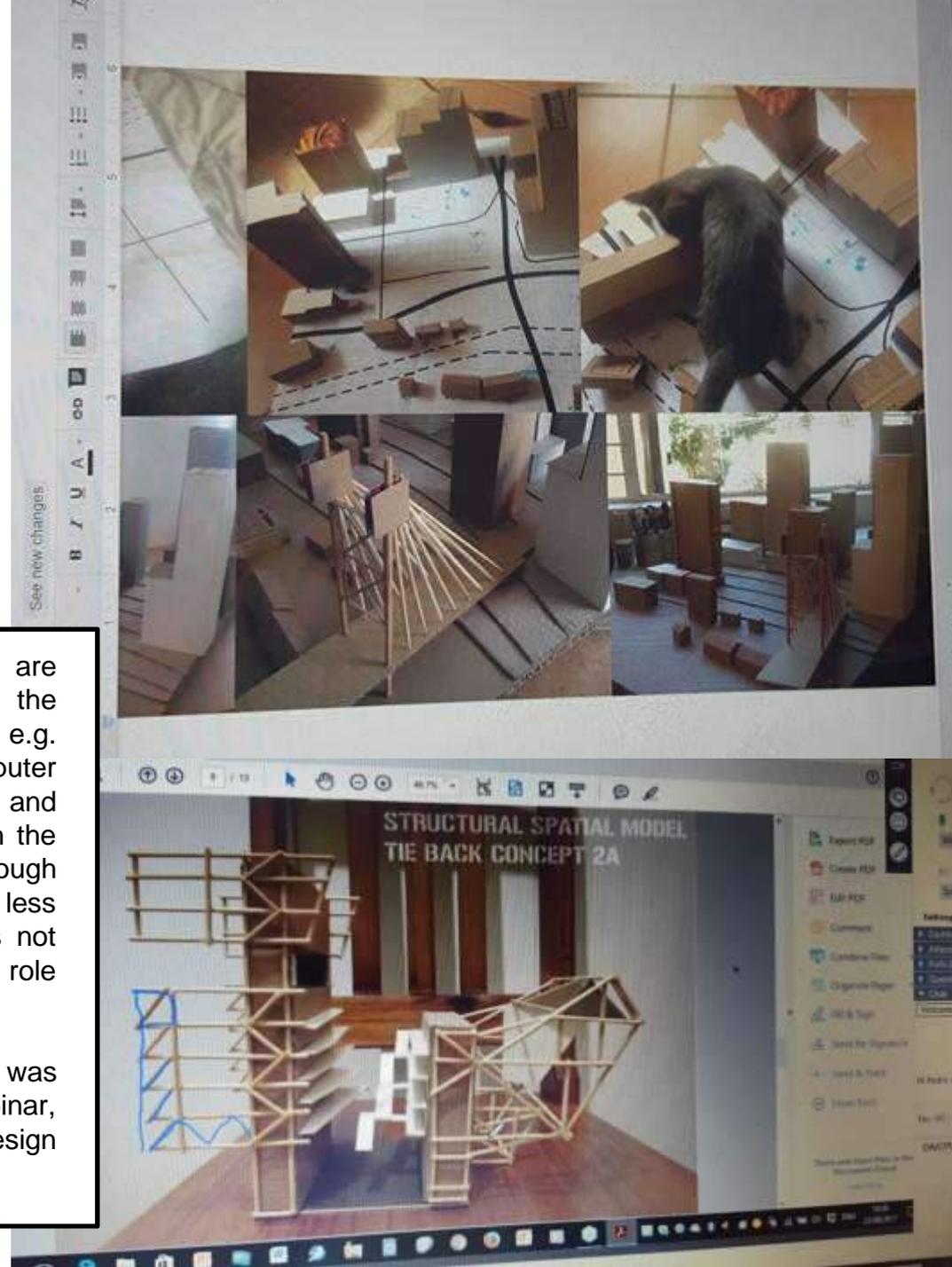
2. Participant-invisible

3. Ubiquitous

4. Media-intensive

In this virtual studio setting, all materials are presented in digital format, regardless of the media through which they were generated e.g. physical models, hand drawn sketches, computer generated graphics, photos or graphic etc., and these can be layered as they move through the different physical and virtual spaces. Although on-screen pointing and sketching may be less spontaneous and drawing with a mouse is not ideal, on-screen markings play an important role in online desk crit communication.

Here you see an example of a model that was photographed, markings added in a webinar, screencasts included in a students' design process journal...



The online desk crit is...

1. Internet-reliant

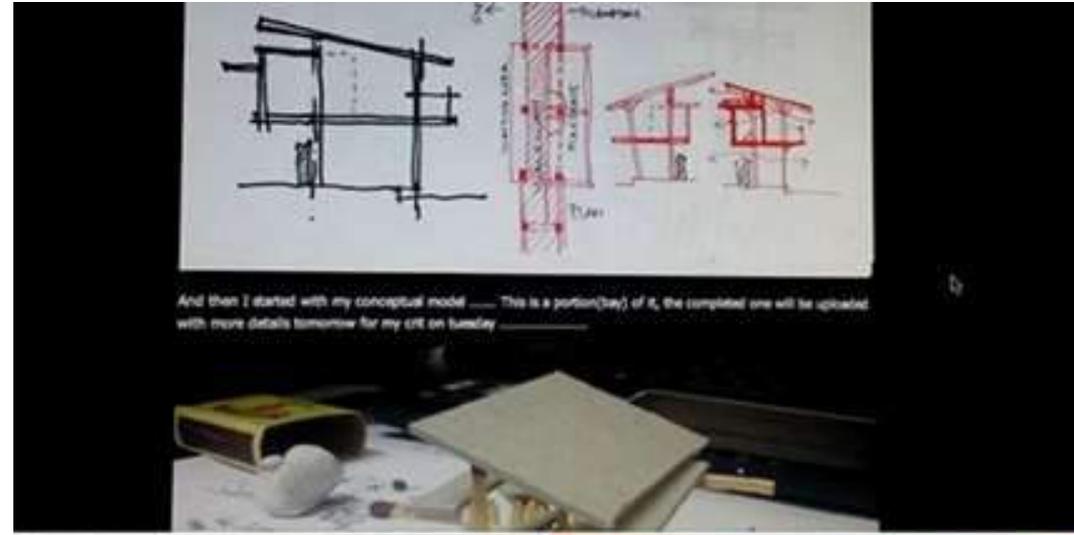
2. Participant-invisible

3. Ubiquitous

4. Media-intensive

5. Multi-communicational

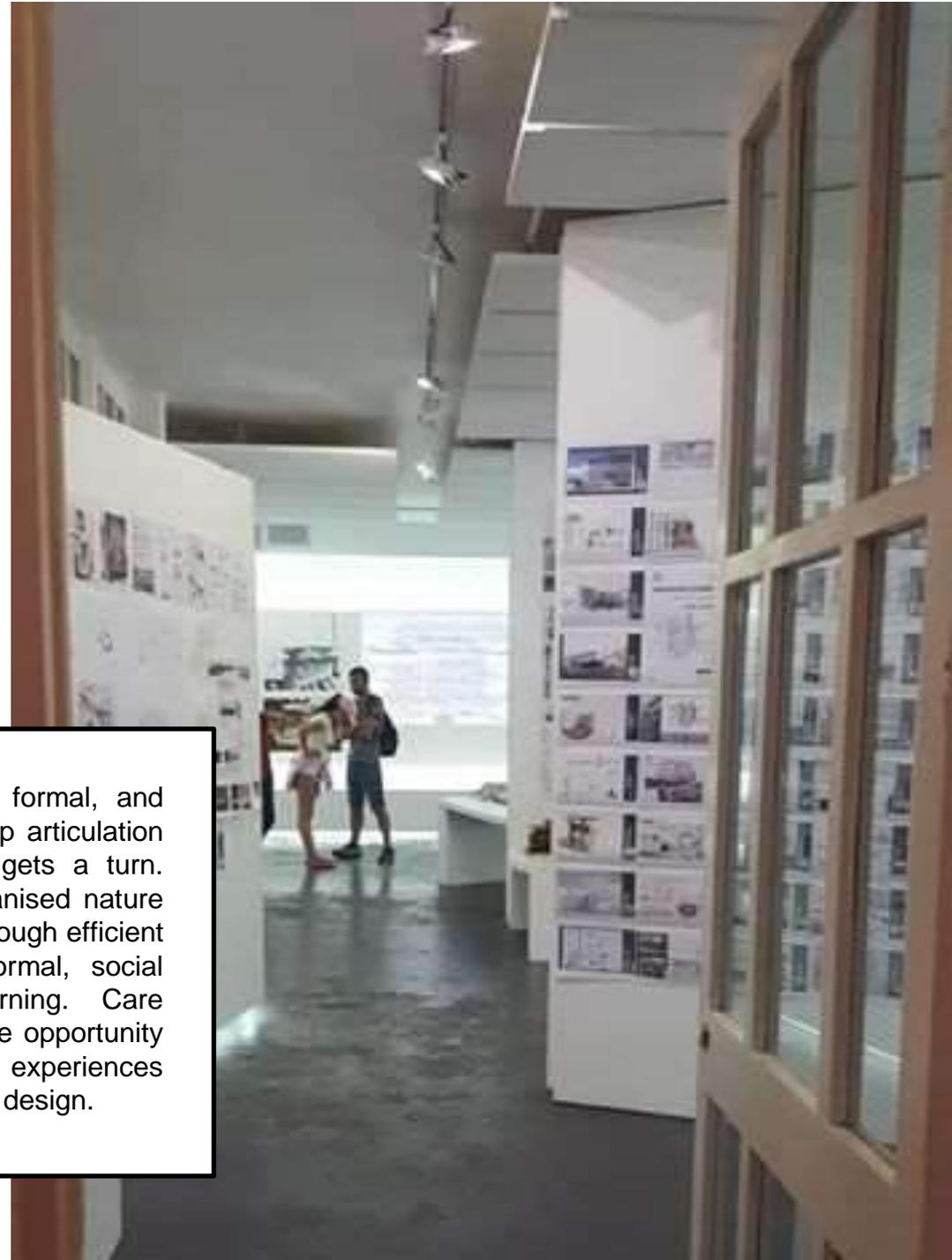
The online desk crit allows for multiple communication tools on the webinar platform, including text chat and co-browsing. Students create a backchannel on WhatsApp that is outside of the online desk crit space, and where tutors are not present. As a result, active peer to peer interaction can exist parallel to the tutor-led webinar platform.



The online desk crit is...

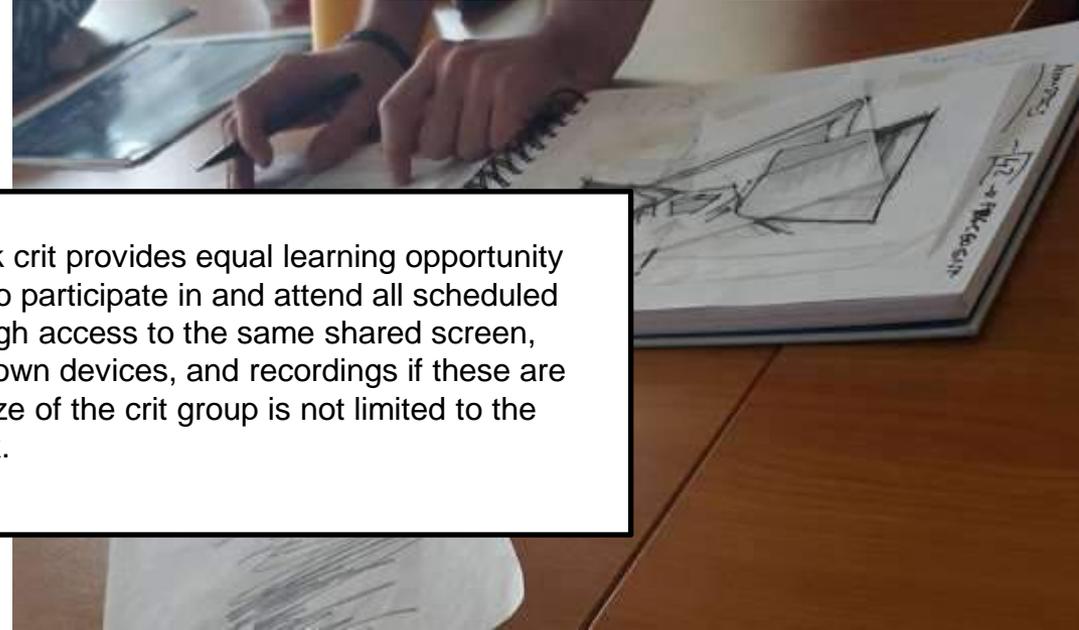
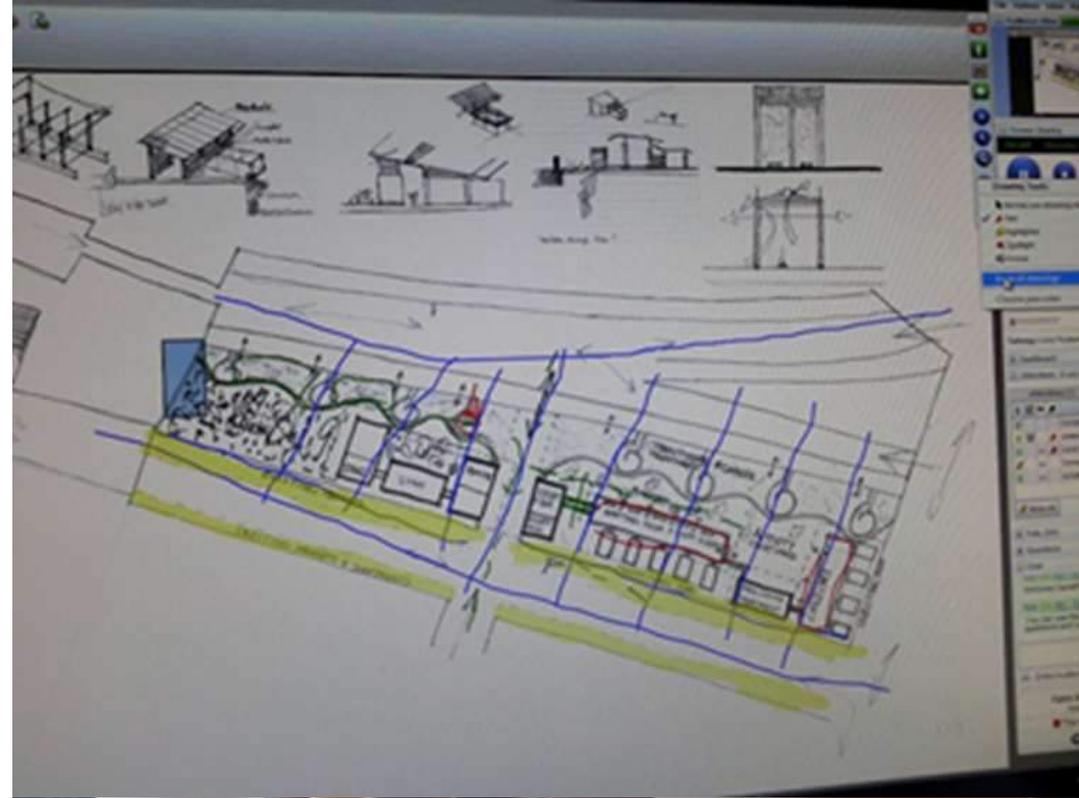
1. Internet-reliant
2. Participant-invisible
3. Ubiquitous
4. Media-intensive
5. Multi-communicational
6. Formal

The online desk crit is formal, and helps students to develop articulation skills. Online everyone gets a turn. Yet, the formal and organised nature of the live online crit, although efficient and focused, limits informal, social and serendipitous learning. Care should be taken to create opportunity for informal learning experiences elsewhere in the learning design.



The online desk crit is...

1. Internet-reliant
2. Participant-invisible
3. Ubiquitous
4. Media-intensive
5. Multi-communicational
6. Formal
7. Accessible

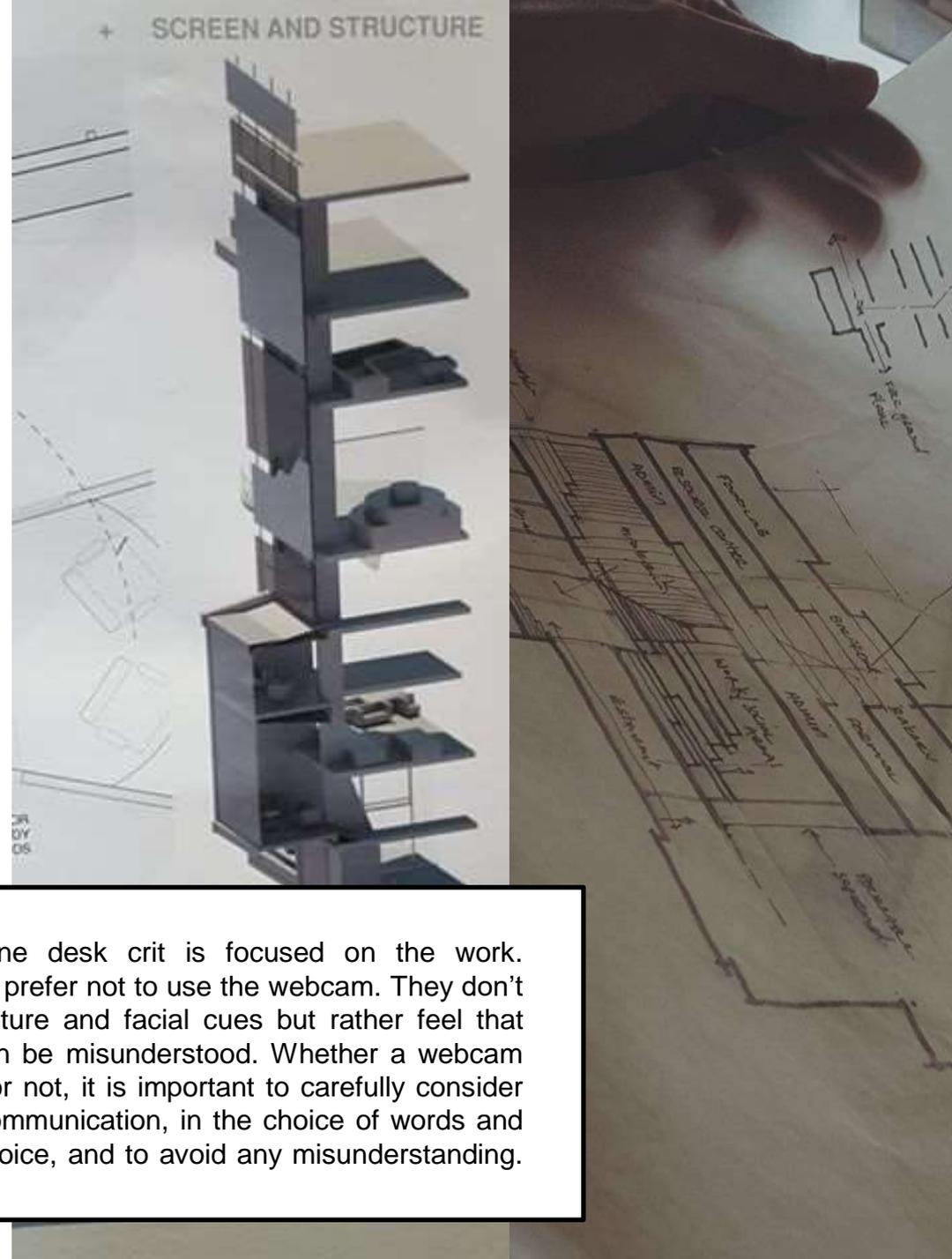


The online desk crit provides equal learning opportunity to all students to participate in and attend all scheduled sessions, through access to the same shared screen, visible on their own devices, and recordings if these are allowed. The size of the crit group is not limited to the size of the desk.

The online desk crit is...

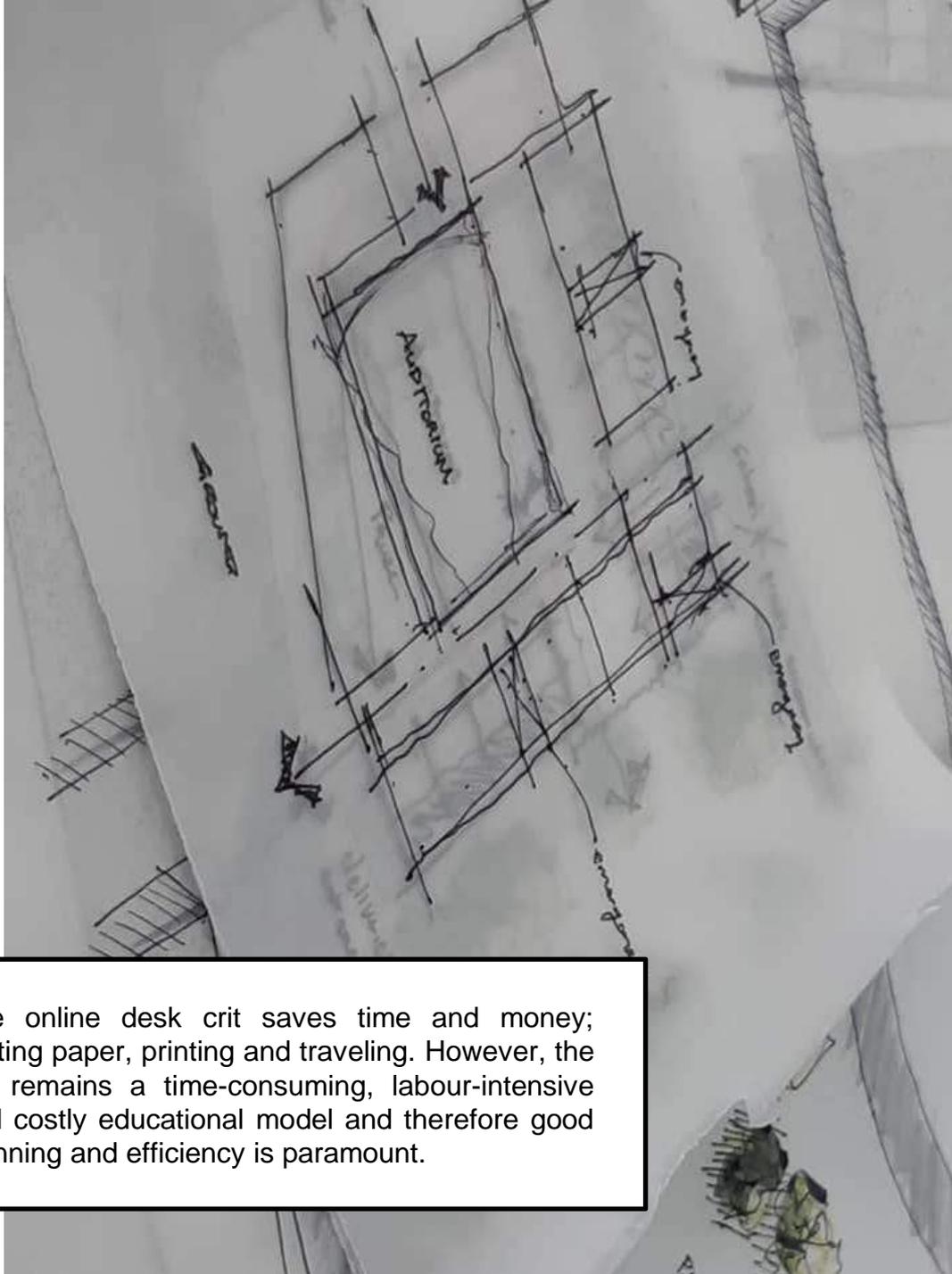
1. Internet-reliant
2. Participant-invisible
3. Ubiquitous
4. Media-intensive
5. Multi-communicational
6. Formal
7. Accessible
8. **Work-focused**

The online desk crit is focused on the work. Students prefer not to use the webcam. They don't miss gesture and facial cues but rather feel that these can be misunderstood. Whether a webcam is used or not, it is important to carefully consider verbal communication, in the choice of words and tone of voice, and to avoid any misunderstanding.



The online desk crit is...

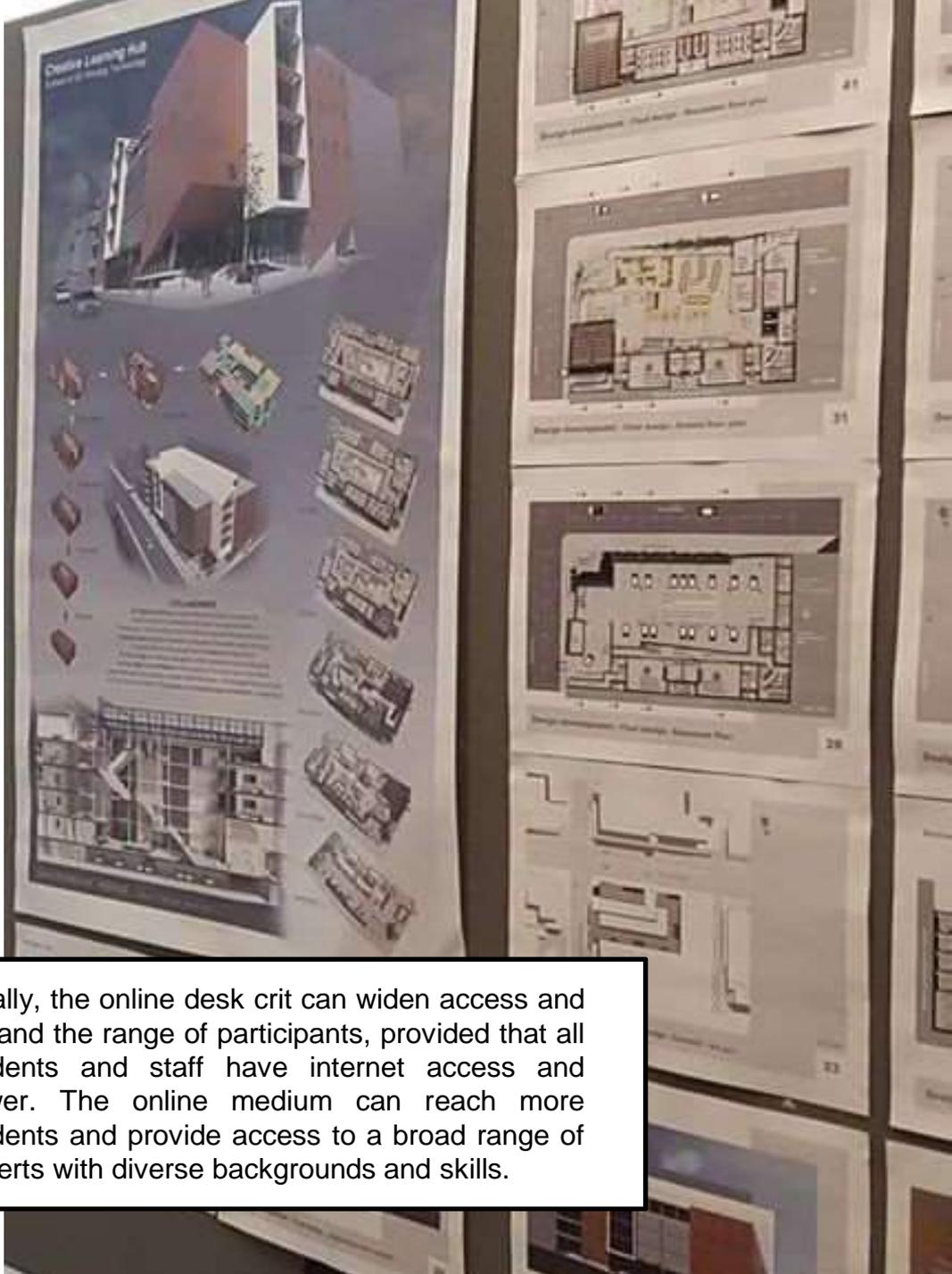
1. Internet-reliant
2. Participant-invisible
3. Ubiquitous
4. Media-intensive
5. Multi-communicational
6. Formal
7. Accessible
8. Work-focused
9. Resource-saving



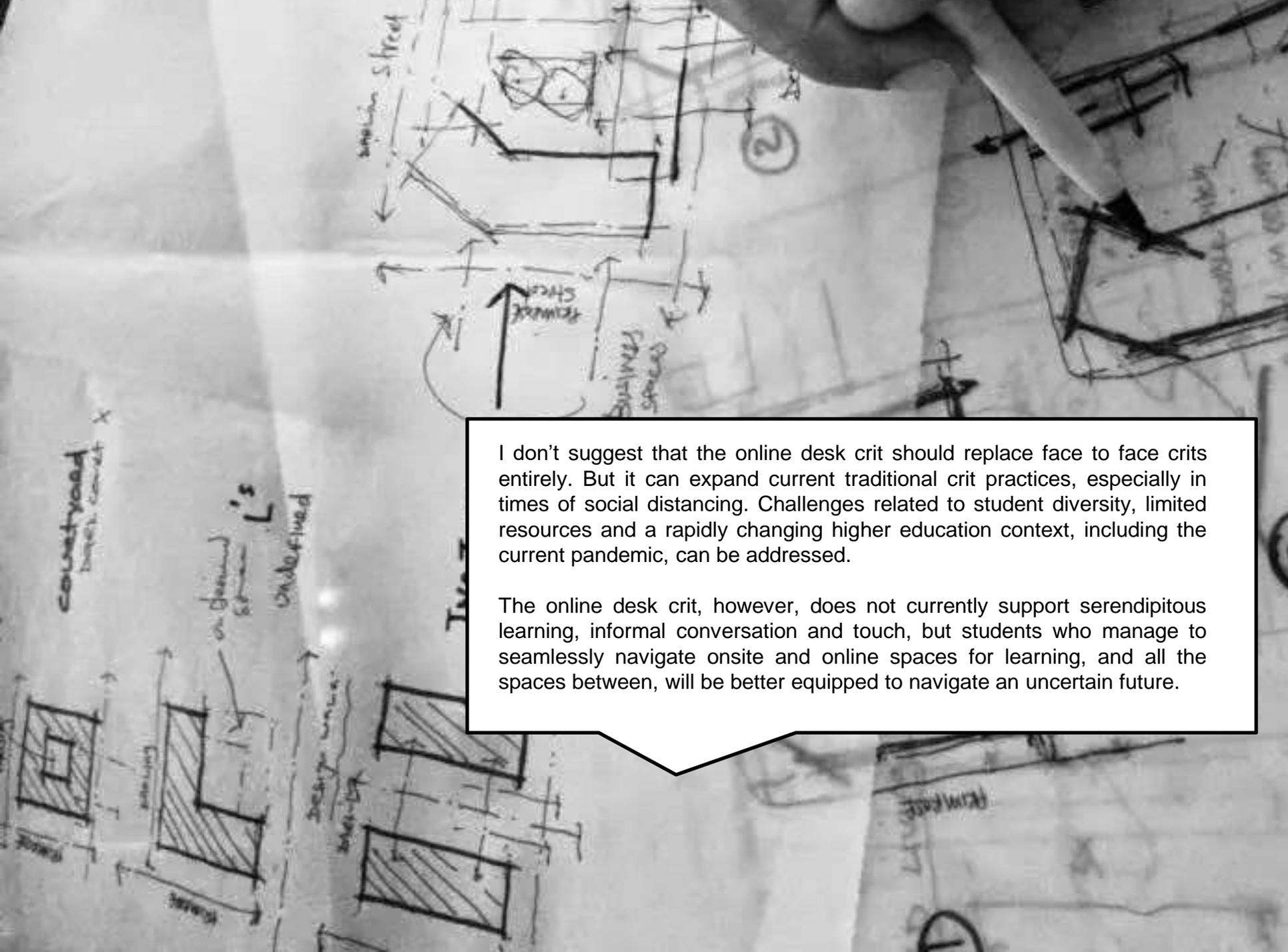
The online desk crit saves time and money; limiting paper, printing and traveling. However, the crit remains a time-consuming, labour-intensive and costly educational model and therefore good planning and efficiency is paramount.

The online desk crit...

1. Internet-reliant
2. Participant-invisible
3. Ubiquitous
4. Media-intensive
5. Multi-communicational
6. Formal
7. Accessible
8. Work-focused
9. Resource-saving
10. Inclusive

The background of the slide features architectural drawings and a 3D model of a building. On the left, a large vertical poster titled 'Creative Learning Hub' shows a 3D rendering of a modern building with a red facade and a central tower. Below the rendering are several smaller architectural drawings, including floor plans and elevations. On the right, a vertical strip of drawings shows more detailed floor plans and sections, with page numbers 30, 31, and 32 visible. The overall theme is architectural design and presentation.

Finally, the online desk crit can widen access and expand the range of participants, provided that all students and staff have internet access and power. The online medium can reach more students and provide access to a broad range of experts with diverse backgrounds and skills.



I don't suggest that the online desk crit should replace face to face crits entirely. But it can expand current traditional crit practices, especially in times of social distancing. Challenges related to student diversity, limited resources and a rapidly changing higher education context, including the current pandemic, can be addressed.

The online desk crit, however, does not currently support serendipitous learning, informal conversation and touch, but students who manage to seamlessly navigate onsite and online spaces for learning, and all the spaces between, will be better equipped to navigate an uncertain future.

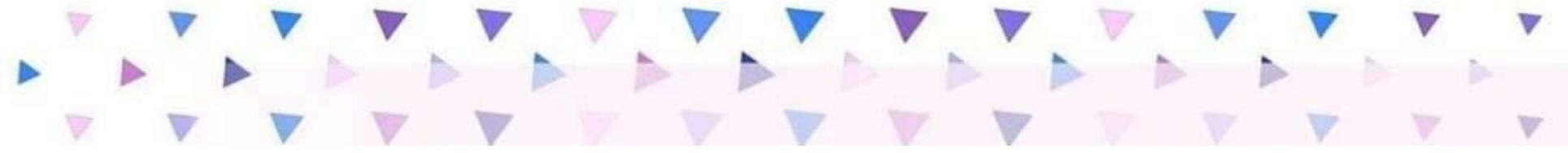


Dinham, S.M. (1987) Architectural education: the possibilities for research on teaching architecture. *Architectural Record April*, 41–43

Morkel, J. (2017) *An exploration of Socratic learning in a webinar setting*. Architecture Connects aae Conference Proceedings, 6 – 9 September 2017, pp [336 – 344](#), Oxford, England.

Poulsen, L., Morkel, J. (2016). *Open Architecture: a blended learning model for architectural education*, [Architecture South Africa: Journal of the South African Institute of Architects](#), [78:28-33, Mar/Apr 2016](#).

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Some observations from the discussion:

- When students run out of physical material, they can use the digital alternative [Dave's example]
- When student work is presented in a linear way/ sequential e.g. via PowerPoint, you need a separate screen/s to access the other drawings. You need the drawings 'next door', big drawings and the craft of drawings.[Dave]
- We need more screens [Dave]
- Navigating drawings on a collaborative platform like miro or conceptboard is currently limited in terms of the number of drawings, and time taken to load [Dave]
- The online desk crit/ tutorial 'will be fine, but it won't be the same' [Frosso]
- Online interactions are time consuming – someone must research why we're so Zoom-fatigued [Jolanda]
- Students should be encouraged to have extraordinary, meaningful experiences and these are best experienced outside of the studio, in society, where students can make a contribution. [Frosso]

To add to my responses:

- The blended studio prepared students for a new way of working, not only for remote studying, but also in the offices where they're employed. Students and graduates are helping their colleagues to set up and work collaboratively online.
- How to replicate the 'extraordinary' online: for example, recently students appointed an in-house DJ to provide entertainment during an online break, whilst others used the whiteboard for digital 'graffiti'. In some architecture schools students set up online pubs and online gyms. Somehow, students will manage to create these spaces, wherever they are. A lot of learning (and fun) happen in the 'invisible' in-between spaces.
- How to improve online facilitation to simulate the human aspect of the desk crit online: Design tutors must be aware of their choice of words, tone of voice and consider that visual cues can't be read that well online, and can be misinterpreted. In addition to articulating feedback and suggestions for improvement, tutors should prompt and question students, and model reflection and exploration, using the on-screen drawing tools where possible, for demonstration.
- Online desk crits should best be used in combination with other online and onsite, formal and informal, synchronous and asynchronous interactions.

