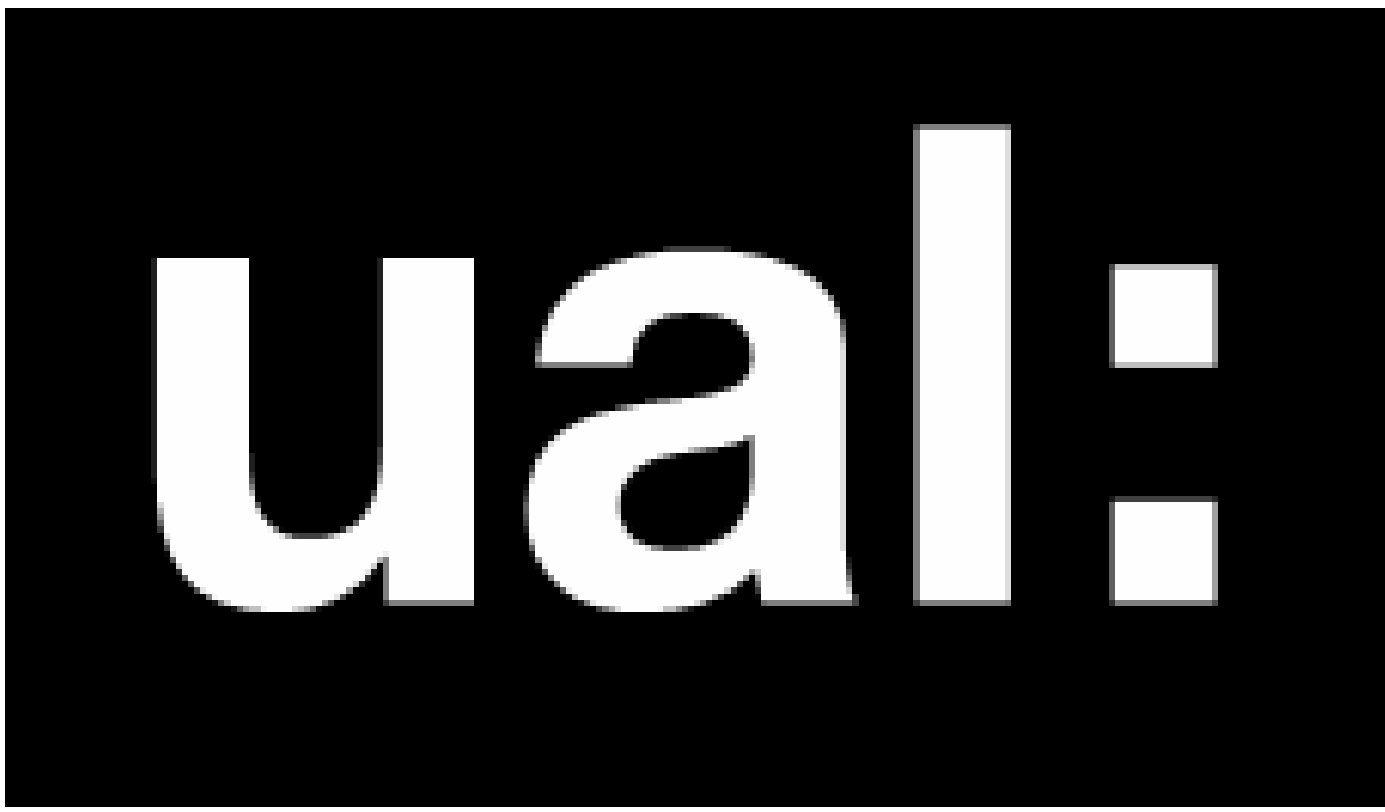# 'In situ': Language teaching and learning in the art and design studio

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BALEAP Professional Issues Meeting: Integration, Northumbria University Newcastle, March 27 2021

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Background

For many years, UAL Language Development's approach has included course-specific weekly classes designed to address the students' language needs in relation to specific assignment briefs, essay questions, reading lists, etc. The 'in situ' project was initiated in order to take this idea of 'embedded' language teaching and learning a step further by placing the language tutor physically into the studios where a great deal of the art & design teaching and learning happens.

The 'in situ' project started in two large Foundation courses (c. 600 students each, c. 50% speakers of English as an additional language) and has since expanded to include various degree courses.

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Pedagogy

- Situated learning: "increasing participation in communities of practice [which] concerns the whole person acting in the world." (Lave & Wenger, 1991, pp50-51)
- Turning 'Academic Literacies' into practice (Lillis, 2003)
- Awareness and understanding of *culture shock, language shock,* and especially *academic shock* (Ryan, 2005, p150)
- Challenging the power of the language testing systems and grounding the learning in its context (Pilcher and Richards, 2017)
- Task-based language learning: "learning to communicate through interaction" (Nunan, 2004, p1)
- Community Language Learning: helping the student to say what they are trying to say in the given moment (e.g. Stevick, 1980)

Language teaching interventions are varied.

- During a 'walk-round crit': Students at art school are often asked to informally exhibit their work and to critique each other's work, orally or in writing. The language tutor coaches students in the informal presentation of their work, including conducting a 'practice walk-round' for those students who feel that they need one.
- At group tutorials: A group tutorial is an opportunity for art and design students to talk through a project, explaining their ideas, detailing their research, discussing their plans, etc. Language tutor feeds back on aspects of communication, alongside the subject tutor who feeds back on content.
  "The language tutor's feedback [is] within the usual parameters for tutor feedback in this context in its overall [art or] design-discourse-centredness, but outside those usual parameters in its targeted focus on spoken language/communication." (Norton & Bernstein, 2019, p. 5)
- At project briefings: Art and design project briefs often contain directions for primary and secondary research as well as parameters for physical art & design outcomes. So there is a lot to 'unpack'.
  Language tutor sets a variety of activities e.g.:
  quizzes to develop comprehension & interpretation of the brief;
  speaking activities to concept check understanding of the brief;
  vocab exercises to explore key words;
  individual or group brainstorming / planning;

The studio is a unique place.

"Some studios are large and can have up to 80 students working in them at any one time; at other times and in other studios there may just be one or two students at work. Activities are hugely varied and quite often there are many different things happening simultaneously. The studio therefore has its own challenges as a site for language teaching and learning but also affords a wide variety of opportunities for different learning activities." (Norton & Bernstein, 2019, p. 4)

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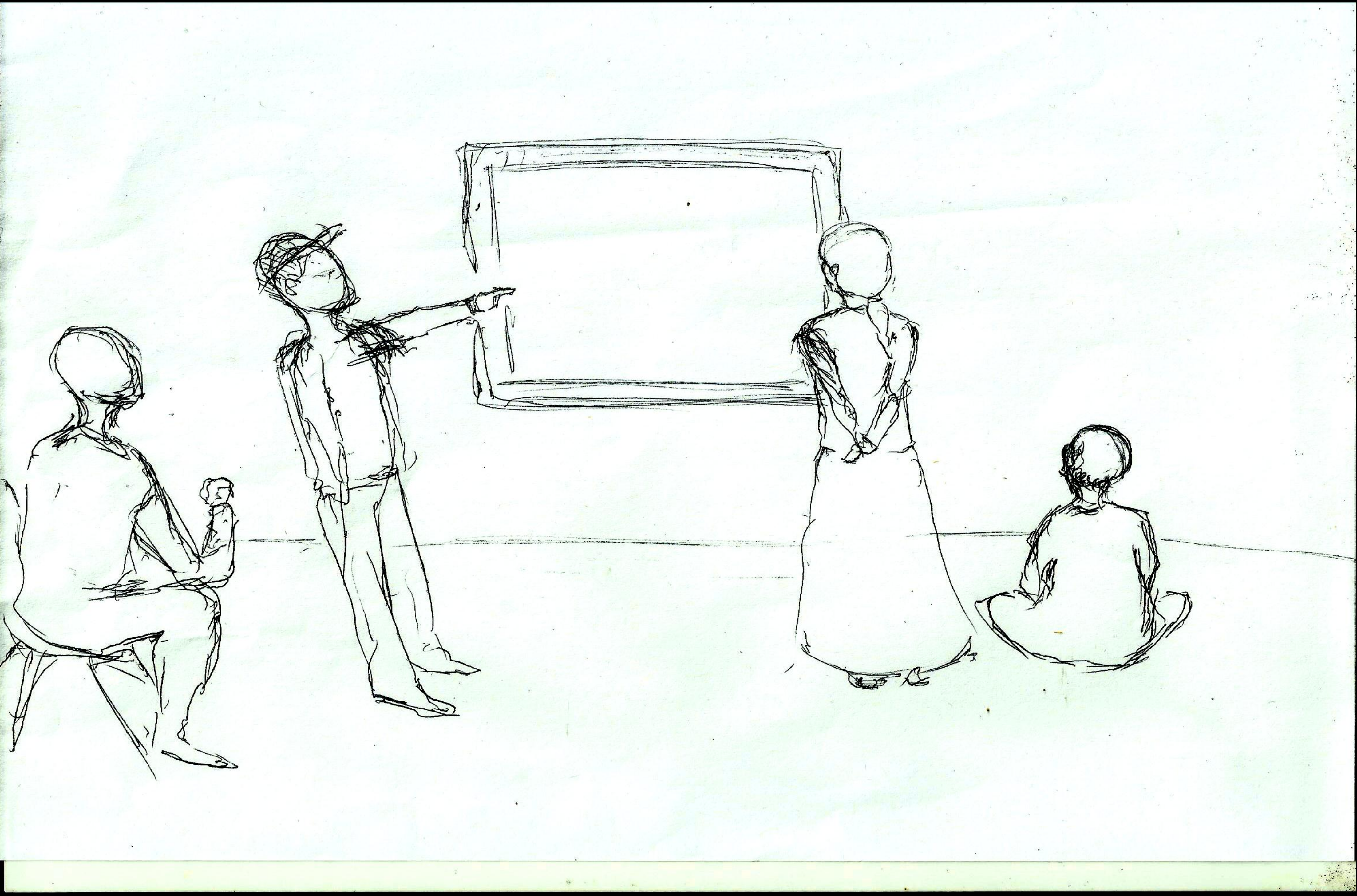
Feedback has been positive.

Positive feedback from academics:

- "More than once, subject tutors have remarked on how much students were talking during in-studio language sessions and the kinds of things they were saying. Teaching techniques which an experienced language teacher might consider to be second nature, e.g. asking students to discuss in pairs before reporting back to the whole group, therefore had a powerful effect in increasing quality and quantity of communication in the studio." (Norton & Bernstein, 2019, p. 5)

An EAP tutor recognises how the milieu affects the teaching & learning:

- "The dynamic was slightly different as this space was clearly theirs […] Most of them were happy to simply talk about their work, […] while one or two had prepared questions/vocab lists. From this session […] I was able to have a better understanding of their work and also of their language levels." (private correspondence)

Students ascribe purpose and value to language tutor being in the studio:

- "you go inside and ask our ideas and you give me some sentence, teach me how to explain our ideas"
- "I have to select one of [two projects] and I couldn't understand much about it so I asked about it to you and you helped me."

(focus group responses reported in Norton and Bernstein, 2019)
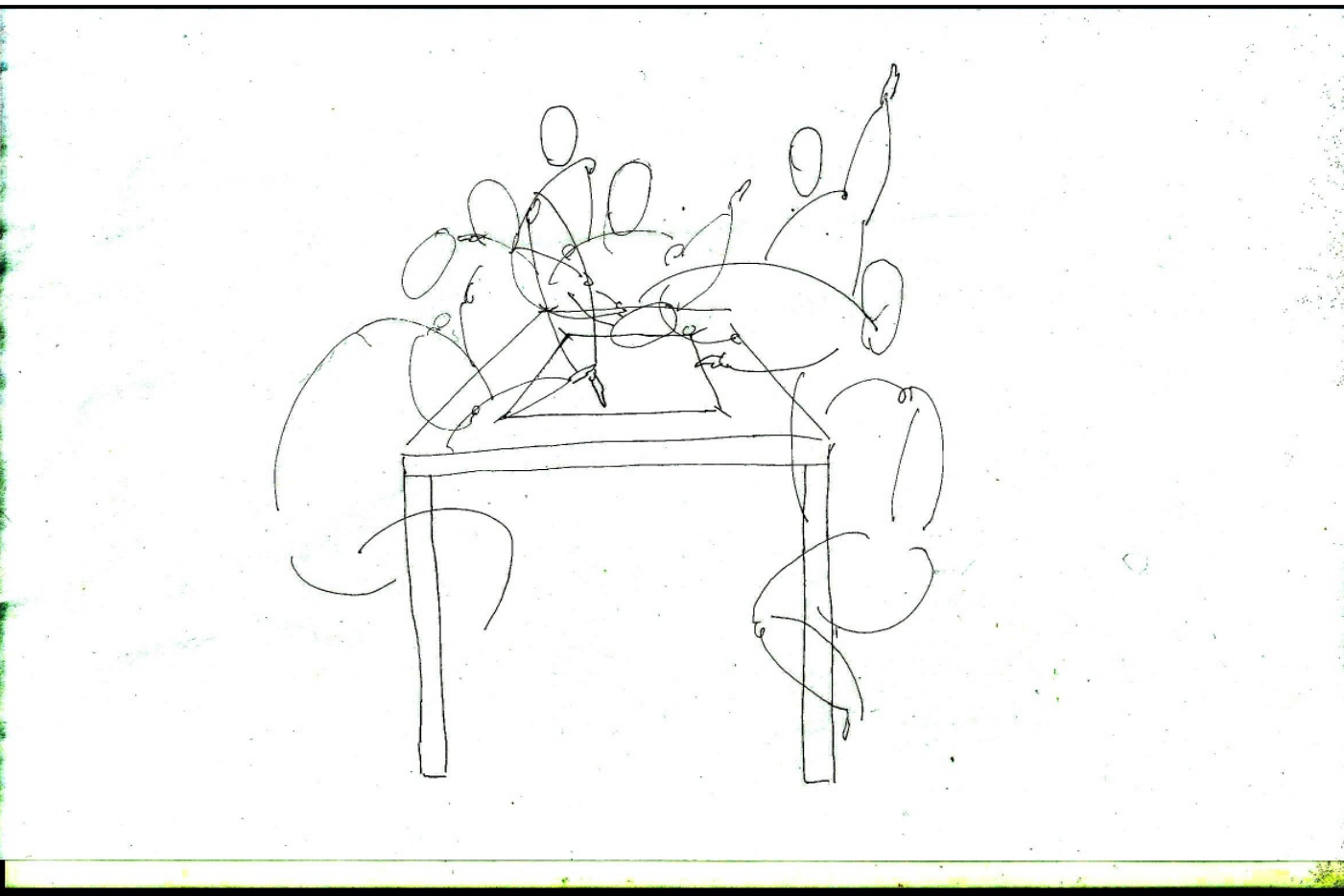
Some challenges

Language tutor may need to (re)define their role and purpose, to (re)build an identity which makes sense to themselves, students and academics:

- Tutor referred to by the course team as "the English guy, the language guy, the grammar guy"
- "I felt like his TA [teaching assistant]"

Language tutor can expect to be outside of their comfort zone:

- "It's not for every teacher. In studio you will lose the kind of autonomy you have as a teacher in a language classroom."

(responses from EAP tutors' meeting, Feb 2020)

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Pandemic implications

Two effects of the pandemic of 2020-2021 have been the partial and at times total closure of the studios, and a substantial increase in workload for academic staff and Language tutors alike. Although a virtual version of the 'in situ' project has been discussed, lack of time and resources have made this, for the present, unworkable. The department's well-established programme of course-specific weekly classes, bookable one-to-one tutorials, and Academic English skills classes, has moved online with considerable success.

We wonder how this approach might apply in different subject areas.

We wonder whether similar approaches have been, or could be, used in different subject areas.

For example:

- Natural sciences - the laboratory
- Medicine & nursing - placements
- Anthropology & other social sciences - field work

Students in all sorts of disciplines have site-specific work &/or internships; social science and humanities students spend a lot of time in seminar rooms, though they are not the only ones. All students visit the university library at some point.

Are the principles from which our intervention derives applicable in these other places? Is work of this kind already taking place in these other contexts? What are, or would be, the specific challenges and the specific language teaching and language learning opportunities in each?

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Images…

- *Image 1* Fungai Benhura painting in the Studio. Photographer: Alys Tomlinson. UAL Image Library.
- *Image 2* Student sketch. Permission given.
- *Image 3* Student sketch. Permission given.
- *Image 4* https://www.designweek.co.uk/issues/3-september-9-september-2018/ual-design-courses-offer-glimpse-into-creative-careers/ [accessed 09/03/2021]

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