University of the Arts, London, Teaching and Professional Fellowship 2004-5

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Project title: Improving reflective practice through learning journals and virtual learning environments.
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Keywords

Abstract

This paper describes work carried out within the Fellowship with the intention of increasing student achievement by improving students' abilities to reflect, evaluate, and act upon their evaluations. I also sought to improve communication across a large Course. Previous external verifiers have recognised the lack of evaluative practice within Foundation Courses as a national issue.

My work since 2002 has involved the introduction, implementation and development of new learning tools. These tools have evolved from the very simple: An A5 pre-printed journal, written into by students, called the Thinktank, to more complex virtual learning environments (VLE) within the University's Blackboard site. A survey of students' final major project portfolios indicates that students who use these tools effectively are more likely to achieve merit & distinction grades in their final examinations. To create the VLE I built and activated a Foundation Studies Blackboard site. I have found that both the Thinktank and Blackboard have merit and have attempted to combine their use across the course.

I piloted a number of Blackboard-specific assignments to encourage on-line peer group learning through the use of asynchronous discussion boards. I observed a number of advantages in using discussion boards, which facilitate a combination of live, (slowed) discussion, and personal reflective practice. The use of discussion boards also brings more benefits for learners such as flexibility of time and place, more time to engage in an online debate, transparency, a certain levelling of different language abilities, automatic archiving: (students can revisit the discussion at any point). Taking discussion board ideas back into live studio debates produced a high level of student engagement.

A more open-ended pilot, the moblog, allows students working on an expressive, self-directed project to send SMS messages to a webpage within the Blackboard site. With this pilot I was interested in exploring the potential of the mobile phone as 'sketchbook/ journal'. Students were positive about the pilot and despite the limitations of SMS messaging, quickly established a recognisable 'voice' and the beginnings of an online community.

Context

The Foundation Studies Course at Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design is a 1 year FE Course within the University of Arts, London. The course has an annual cohort of around 620 students. Approximately 200 of these students are International Students. The course is structured into 3 stages; Diagnostic, Pathway and Confirmatory. At the Pathway stage students locate themselves within 1 of a choice of 20 specialist studios. These studios are currently located across 4 Curriculum Areas; Fine Art, Fashion & Textiles, Visual Communication, 3DD.
For the Confirmatory stage, students carry out a self directed final major project.

The Foundation Studies Course is located on one site in central London. Much of our teaching is through problem-based Art & Design projects.

The work that I carried out within the Fellowship builds upon Action Research carried out over the past two years. In 2003-4 I was successful in achieving an Action Research Project award (Support 4 Success) from the Learning & Skills development Agency to research and to improve the 2003-4 'Thinktank'. This award was used largely to work with students and staff focus groups to try to build up a clearer picture of our students' needs. Together we explored

- Students' prior experiences of working with diaries and logbooks.
- Students' expectations in studying on the Foundation Course,
- Methods of interrogating and explaining the National Diploma language used to describe the Course framework.

Most importantly we critiqued the current year's Thinkank through both student and staff focus groups and created collaborative solutions for an improved version for 2004-5. My objective within the Fellowship was to develop, deliver and evaluate these proposals across the Course.

While the positive effects of using reflective journals are championed by many educationalists, their implementation upon the Foundation Course has provoked a lot of extreme feeling (both positive and negative) amongst students and staff. Some students and staff see working within the Thinktank as a low priority in comparison to the production of images and objects in the studios.

There is some evidence to suggest that the benefit of having used the Thinktank is not often clear to students until they have completed the Foundation Course, and are in the position to reflect upon the different facets of their learning. [1]

Trying to encourage Foundation students to work with reflective diaries remains problematic. However, student feedback indicates an increasingly positive attitude towards the Reflective Diary/ Thinktank over the three years of its existence.

Proposals, Strategies, and Evaluations, 2004-5

1. ***That the 2004-5 'Thinktank' should be Indispensable to the students. It should contain key information, directory, glossary of terms, studio descriptions. It should be an example of good quality, exciting design. It should be of a highly customisable nature, to increase student engagement, and should be available in more diverse formats; (i.e. printed, online, different options available so that students can choose the most appropriate), to give choice and to reflect diverse learning styles.***

Vital Course information was published within the 2004-5 Thinktank. Associate Lecturers (ALs) were asked to be a part of the Thinktank by writing descriptions of their studios and professional practice that were published within the Thinktank. Essential student information was readily at hand in a book that was to be in daily use. The design of the 2004-5 Thinktank was achieved through a collaboration of students, staff and the design group Peepshow. The design was overtly visual to try to engage visual students and to communicate to students that the Thinktank could be used to collect, consider and organise visual material. By designing the Thinktank as Two A1 posters, a ring binder and a rubber band, we put students into the position where they had to physically construct their own book. We hoped that by constructing their Thinktanks the students would read it as they made it.

While the visual design of the Thinktank and its associated material succeeded in engaging the students, It also created tensions and questions from some students who felt its visual style was an imposition upon them, something that impinged upon their own creativity. Some tutors used these tensions to open up discussions with students, encouraging them to take control of the form of their Thinktanks, inventing their own versions if they wished to.

The Course surveyed the portfolios of students achieving distinction grades in 2004-5 and found a strong correlation between high achievement and well-used Thinktanks. In addition, students who achieved distinction level had often created their own versions of the Thinktank.

2. ***That the 2004-5 'Thinktank' should utilize: A more student centred approach, Student friendly language, and simple instructions. We should not expect students to fill things in that they can't see the point of, but should show the students that the book is useful.***

Difficult language used in previous versions was simplified. Explanations such as 'what are the reasons for writing about my work', 'How should I use the Thinktank', and 'How do we present work in group discussions, tutorials and self-assessment sessions', are part of the information within the Thinktank. A glossary of terms was added to try to explain the Course Assessment criteria.

Student feedback suggested that language deployed in the Thinktank 2004-5 was well pitched.

3. ***That delivery of the 2004-5 'Thinktank' should be improved by: Better explanation/induction to students and staff.***

I gave an induction presentation to students and staff prior to distributing the Thinktank. This induction introduced the Thinktank and Blackboard. I explained the Thinktank's purpose within the context of the Foundation Diploma, and in the larger context of learning to become a practising artist or designer. I explained that the students would be receiving a kit of parts and that these parts would constitute the bare bones of a learning tool. This tool would then be built upon by the student and by the tutors. It was explained to students that if they didn't like our templates within the Thinktank they were free to design and use their own.

Large-scale induction of this kind effectively communicated the same message to a large number of Students and Staff. A future induction could be designed to contain a specific course-wide task that encourages the students to work with their new tools. This project should be short and dynamic, with a visible outcome, i.e. an online exhibition featuring the entire 620 students, students being asked to create 'bookart' pieces within their Thinktanks.

4. ***That the 2004-5 Thinktank should be developed as a VLE Pilot using Blackboard as a tool for discussion and evaluation.***

After inducting the students to Blackboard, I instigated some provocative but optional discussion forums: 'there are no new ideas', 'craft is dead' with limited success.

I addressed this by creating another forum entitled, 'what is the point of Public art'. This time I tied the forum into a BA Arts, Design & Environment live project. Students were told that the forum would establish a context for a project that would ask them to design for a Public Space, and that they were required to make a minimum of two postings during a period of a week.

Some tutors then took some of the main abstract concepts that had risen within the on-line discussion, [social responsibility/ creative control, the importance of site, who should pay],

and developed the ideas within a studio seminar. Students were put into groups of six, given a concept and asked to create an argument that used existing pieces of public art to support it. They then fed back to the rest of the group enabling further discussion

The discussion was much more successful, with 140 postings and many students engaging in debate.
The tutors involved in the studio discussion and I found the engagement of the students, level of the debate and understanding of the students to be very high. Students had been prepared through their on-line work. Indeed some students referred to the Discussion Board during the studio seminar. John Cowan (1998) refers to this principle of shared reflection, ' Dialogue with a peer prompts me to engage in reflection, which may be shared.'

5. ***That the 2004-5 Thinktank should be developed as a VLE Pilot using Blackboard as a tool for communication.***

I built the Foundation Studies site and posted and updated essential course information. A dedicated Course administrator posted all projects. Students and staff used the announcement and discussion boards. The Open format of Blackboard allows you to 'grow' the site as the year unfolds, ensuring that students don't get bombarded with irrelevant information. As the year progressed we were able to trickle information to students at the right time. Tutors prepared project briefs and teaching materials to an A5 format to distribute to students. Having now constructed a Blackboard site, it can easily be modified and primed for next year. It should be noted that Blackboard requires a substantial investment of time to initially set up a site.

We have created a series of short workshop induction films that can be viewed by students through Blackboard, either within the University or externally through a broadband connection.

The films do not currently replace the formal Health & Safety inductions but act as a more informative and accessible support resource that recognises the limitations of one-off workshop inductions for students. [Students can only absorb a certain amount of information. 3D workshops can be intimidating places. Demonstrations cannot often be clearly seen by all students. Students do not really take in information until they need it for a specific task. Some students are embarrassed to come back and ask for Technical help after having had a formal induction], Blackboard allows the student to access this material whenever they need it, empowering them to plan programmes of work more effectively. The films were constructed as small useful chunks to be viewed easily within the University intranet or elsewhere through a Broadband connection.

This use of Blackboard was identified as exemplary practice in the recent University Health & Safety Audit.

The Language Centre is adapting our films for use as on-line teaching materials to use with international students.

Students reported positively about the impact of Blackboard on communications. The use of Blackboard has improved Students perceptions of communications. Because all Course

information and projects are available through Blackboard, tutors and administrators are no longer wasting time making photocopies.

It must be stressed that Blackboard has operated as a pilot this year, and needs to be run across the Course before proper evaluation. Some staff are unaware of the potential of Blackboard as a communication tool, and staff development is needed across the Course, particularly amongst ALs, the main teaching force on the Foundation Course.

Staff will also need easy access to computers to prepare material for Blackboard. These computers will require a minimum of Photoshop, Acrobat, Word. Internet connection.

The 'moblog' pilot allowed a small group of Students (Mobloggers), to send SMS messages to a dedicated Blackboard page. A feedback session with the students produced the following comments.

Using the moblog was useful and had been enjoyed. Despite the limited format of the SMS message, students had quickly established a recognisable 'voice'. There were perceived advantages to the form of the SMS message. Mobile phones are ubiquitous. Everyone knows how to send an SMS message, (There is no learning of new systems to be done). When reading the SMS message, They are simple to read (partly due to the inherent 160-character limit). There are no problems with learning/using complex software.

Mobloggers used the moblog to record simple ideas, thoughts, fragments of text, and not to write or reflect upon work. Students reported that using the moblog would encourage them to focus upon their surroundings, (similar to the act of drawing in a sketchbook). The work carried out in the moblog did not translate into studio work in this instance. Students seemed much more comfortable with the ideas existing in virtual space. (When I produced a printed version of the postings, there was an adverse reaction from students).

The Mobloggers wished that more people had been involved. They felt that more users would have created more of a sense of community. Mobloggers felt that the moblog page should have a live physical presence, to encourage more users and create more excitement. Students did not see any point in a webpage of this type being confidential.

ITRDU is developing a more sophisticated page that could contain a simple set of web tools (including photo messaging). Mobloggers would like a page that can be fed into/edited in all sorts of different ways. We would like to pilot this across a larger student group in 2005-6. We would also like to develop this initiative through an extended collaboration using our Unit 3 City project, where all students would be required to send (a minimum of 2 messages) to a single Blackboard page. This could also be outputted in the Back Hill Gallery through a large LCD display and a series of monitors. (September 2005)

6. ***That the 2004-5 Thinktank should be financially viable through external funding***

Design costs were paid by the LSDA Action Research Award. The Foundation Course successfully raised some funding revenue through the sale of advertising space within the 2004-5 Thinktank to art & design retail suppliers. These did not cover the full cost of producing the Thinktank.

It may be that in future years printing costs will be greatly reduced by the use of Blackboard for the main part of the 'information'' side of the Thinktank. Students may not need or wish to print information if it is always available online.

Sponsorship might still be sought by offering 'banner space' upon the Blackboard site. This strategy is subject to University approval.

Unexpected Outcomes

My original intention in creating an online version of the Thinktank was to build a simple Blackboard Site for the Foundation Studies Course. An online Thinktank would then be housed within it. Following discussions with David Rowsell at ITRDU, it became clear that Blackboard could carry out much of the work that the Thinktank sought to do (i.e. encouraging reflective practise, helping to facilitate peer group learning, providing evidence of learning, improving communication across a large Course). I realised that the Thinktank and Blackboard needed to be developed in parallel. It may be helpful to look at their relative intrinsic qualities.

Issue	Blackboard	Thin
Ease of use	- Requires a computer with an online connection. - Some students and staff do not naturally use Blackboard and both need the investment of induction/development - Every day looks the same. The online environment is not as exciting or tactile an environment as the Studio environment. On-line discussion is not naturally as dynamic, colourful or dangerous as studio discussion. - There are limitations in sharing discussing visual work on-line. Much student work would lose out through being scanned/photographed, uploaded and discussed on-line. On the other hand, online discussions can be made to contain links to an infinite number of images through the internet. - The potential to create 'living projects' to some degree controlled by the students. Projects/competitions for students to design forthcoming sections can be easily constructed. Winning work could then be printed/downloaded distributed and used by other students.	
Usefulness of published information	- Blackboard can contain more comprehensive information and can be easily updated. - Students can potentially access all Course/University information at any time using Blackboard. - Blackboard depends upon Students making regular checks	
Role in encouraging reflective practice,	- I noticed many positive aspects in using discussion boards to support reflective writing. - Students can take time to consider the arguments of others, and to create arguments of their own. - Discussion boards can become a 'mental bridge' between untaught days. [Work on the discussion boards can continue to progress when there is no studio teaching.] - Discussion boards can be non-linear, [they can be visited/revisited in any order, they can usefully be summarised]	

	• Discussion boards have an inherent transparency. Students are aware that there is no 'hidden agenda'. Views and arguments are available for continued scrutiny. [the moment never 'passes' as in a studio discussion] • ITRDU have just enabled a 'blog' section within Blackboard that also enables tutor comment. We should consider how this might enable students to evaluate and act upon their evaluations.	
Role in assisting peer Group learning,	I noticed many positive aspects in using discussion boards for peer group discussion. Some of this is due to their asynchronous nature. • Students can work when they want to or are able to. • Discussion Boards have the potential to operate as a 'cultural leveller'. Students who are confident speaking in traditional studio sessions may be advantaged within discussion board work. • Some International students disadvantaged through their lack of English language skills within a fast moving Studio discussion, may be advantaged by using the extra time that is available within an asynchronous online discussion. This might lead to much improved perceptions of our international students intellect and abilities by their peers and tutors • Engaged students enjoy checking the progress of the debate. Their responses then fuel the debate. The discussion can move along very quickly. • On the other hand it can all suddenly stop. Giving a discussion a time limit and sticking to it seems to increase engagement. Integrating the use of discussion boards to the curriculum and to making engagement a requirement works even better. • Students can learn by 'lurking'. 'Lurkers' are students who read the debate but do not post. A question was posted by a student within the 3DD Easter Vacation Forum. I answered the question. The question and answer were viewed 57 times over a two week period	
Role within in Assessment	• How do we assess the work that the Students post within the discussion boards? • The answer here may be to set a task that depends upon a successful discussion board e.g. a short piece of writing that is an evaluation of the discussion board. This would happen quite naturally within our review essay project. [Students visit an exhibition, collect existing information about the artist, take part in a discussion board debate about the exhibition, write a 500 word review of their own] • How do we deal with students who do not engage in the discussion boards?	

My next challenge is to develop the delivery of the curriculum utilising the positive developments that have emerged within this project.

We will need to measure future success through achievement and student feedback, but also through internal devices such as measuring 'hits' on the site through ITRDU. We are now in a position to further develop new schemes of work and teaching materials.

I have devised a proposed framework that begins to look at how we might integrate the use of Blackboard into the Foundation curriculum.

Term 1

Unit 1	Unit 2	Unit 3	Unit 4
• All student are inducted into Blackboard • Students are given the task of creating their homepage. (possible link with computing induction) • 'Welcome, Get to know each other forum' is set up. • Discussion forums are set up for the Exhibition review. (all students & tutors required to make at least 2 postings) • Course documents are posted	• City project involves online exhibition featuring all 600 students • A forum to discuss the city project is set up. (all students & tutors required to make at least 2 postings) • Curriculum area presentation and Studio information for all studios is posted	• Q & A forums are set up for all studios • Workshop induction films are posted	• Themati set up to Unit 4 re students required least 2 p • Pre-Uca: including Universi posted. I directors encourag in studio

Term 2 Term 2

Unit 6	Unit 7	Unit 8	Unit 9
• Blackboard groups are set up as Students specialise into pathway groups. Tutors can now e-mail student group to give instructions, and can post their own discussion boards, tasks and materials as appropriate to their specialisms	• Blackboard groups are set up as Students specialise into pathway groups. Tutors can now e-mail student group to give instructions, and can post their own discussion boards, tasks and materials as appropriate to their specialisms.	• Blackboard groups are set up as Students specialise into pathway groups. Tutors can now e-mail student group to give instructions, and can post their own discussion boards, tasks and materials as appropriate to their specialisms	Blackboard groups Students specialise groups. Tutors can student group to gi instructions, and ca own discussion bo materials as approp specialisms

	• Final Examination information is posted.	• Easter Vacation forum is set up	

Outcomes

Research Paper proposal accepted for ISL, (Improving Student Learning) 5th September 2005
The 2004-5 Thinktank has been short listed for: Index, design for life award, September 2005, www.index2005.dk

Ongoing work is being appraised and discussed by the Central Saint Martins Pedagogic research group in its exploration of issues central to teaching and learning. Further funding opportunities are being investigated through this route.

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Appendices

Thinktank 2004-5 PDF

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[1] In the Stage 3 student feedback survey, the end of the 2004-5 Course, 75% of the cohort answered 'yes' to the question. *'Has the Course helped you to increase your knowledge and understanding of the creative process through: The use of written language, both to plan and reflect on experiences e.g. Reflective Diary (Thinktank)?'*. At stage 2 only 40% of the cohort answered yes.

1