

## **Spark: UAL Creative Teaching and Learning Journal**

### **Finding your place: preparing creative students for industry**

**Ellen Hanceri, Academic Coordinator for Careers and Employability and Senior Lecturer in Illustration and Print, London College of Communication**

#### **Abstract**

This case study describes the activities in an undergraduate unit that encourages student enterprise and employability. Its implementation relies on a more general understanding of 'curriculum' and this article presents an overview of this transferable course structure. By collecting and analysing data on industry, conducting market research and by approaching companies or organisations students would like to work for – that they aspire to be associated with – they gain a better understanding of their own identities and can direct their self-image in professional and group working environments. It is argued that this develops their confidence to become independent thinkers and original designers, working for their own ends.

#### **Keywords**

enterprise, employability, industry, self-efficacy, confidence, self-image

#### **Introduction**

The case study described in this article is a single unit that was introduced in year 2 of an undergraduate degree course in the School of Design at London College of Communication. The unit aims to encourage student enterprise and employability at this key stage, supported by skills developed at other times during the course. That is at a point where they have explored what it is to be a student of their chosen discipline in year 1 and before they are distracted by the pressures of final projects and deadlines in year 3. At all times this unit encourages students to accumulate knowledge of the breadth of a professional discipline, providing them with opportunities to further their own stake in any discipline. It is therefore potentially applicable to all art, design and communication courses.

#### **Unit outline: implementation**

The unit, which lasts for one term, integrates a core project that allows students to use creative practice in a way that involves direct interaction with external organisations, fostering transferable skills via experiences in industry. The core creative project of the unit is, in effect, a simulated external brief that could become live if the work reaches a high enough standard to be presented to industry.

#### *Researching the discipline*

Students are initially required to write a short piece entitled 'What is [name of discipline being studied, e.g. Illustration]?'. The piece requires students to include examples of their own creative work alongside that of current practitioners whom they admire: enabling assessors to see how much they acknowledge the breadth of a discipline. Student knowledge of the discipline is fuelled by a simultaneous activity where students gather information on suppliers,

retailers, exhibition spaces, venues, manufacturers that fosters a general appreciation of the aesthetic and mood in a specified geographical location, from the architecture and the paving stones of that place, to aspects of social change and other aspects of the visual environment. This work is presented to peers and staff in an oral presentation, developing skills in public speaking and self-presentation that will be of use throughout their creative futures.

#### *Industry project*

Building upon this initial research, students then select one external organisation or company, for whom they design a collection or create an activity that aims to change or add to the company's practice. This focused case study activity encourages them to be a problem finder as well as solver. From an enquiry-based standpoint, they are able to create new ways of thinking, working and responding to challenges. Once they have developed their project, students then write a concise reflective personal career statement – on 'my past', 'what I'm doing now', 'where I aspire to be in the future' – describing the aspirations that underpin the choices they make. The next stage of this activity then involves them writing a CV and introductory correspondence in response to talks given by invited representatives from industry, which provide guidance about approaching an organisation.

#### *Showcasing and networking: collaborative event*

The work generated during the unit's central industry project is then shown in a final group exhibition. This event is curated, edited and organised by student teams with some guidance from academic staff. At this stage, students invite representatives from the external partner that was explored in their project. This final show involves peer assessment and challenges their ability to work interdependently and with others, strengthening attributes such as trust, respect, empathy, and tact.

#### *Peer-to-peer assessment:*

The final activity involves a process where students conduct initial 10-minute one-to-one interviews with one other student. They then undertake role-play presentations, in which they act as a client, and present the work of the student they have interviewed, to the whole group. As students do not have the opportunity to talk about their own project work to the whole group, the one-to-one interview is very important as they have to use this limited time to accurately communicate their vision and ideas to another person. It provides a chance for students to discover how well they are communicating their own identities and how their work is interpreted by others. By asking them to peer review how successful their summaries and presentations are in representing each collection/project, this forum exposes levels of confidence, revealing to students that if they can develop self-efficacy and be agile they will build resilience, useful for coping in uncertain work environments.

#### *Industry feedback*

As part of the course, we gather feedback from industry professionals who attended the exhibition, capturing their comments in a visitor's book, and following up with emails to help extend the relationship where appropriate. We also gather digital feedback from the organisations that develop a relationship with students as a result of the process: useful feedback comes with successful connections, which can continue to mature far beyond the unit term. The exhibition helps students to understand the value of different kinds of connectivity and develop adaptive communication skills. Tangible results manifest from the direct interaction the exhibition facilitates in many different forms, and students undertake activities involving negotiation, complex decisions and strategic thinking about which paths to follow.

### **Evaluation and benefits**

When students engage with enterprise and employability in this way, they gain a sense of who they are and how others interpret them, which develops their individual professional and creative identity. The unit enables them to direct where they are going by using transferrable skills that involve investigating unexplored paths or a more in-depth study, leaving them fully able to contribute to a more general debate in group work and when working within a wider discipline. Ultimately, they benefit from their output, due to the industry exposure it encourages.

Students are often surprised by their own abilities, and an energy is created by working with peers. The self-assessment and collaborative elements of the unit enable them to productively use this energy. As Boud suggests:

If students are to be prepared for professional practice, critical questioning of competency standards and learning outcomes must take place. Self assessment procedures can provide an important area for this to happen. If they do, they give expression to an emancipatory interest. (Boud, 1995, p.61)

By handing over so many choices to the students, the unit's curriculum content remains current and relevant, reacting to and in dialogue with an ever-changing set of external influences.

The unit allows the University, the college and our students to reach an industry-focused audience. The active participation and engagement of external partners is an integral part of project realisation and formative assessment:

Assessment fosters wider improvement when representatives from across the educational community are involved [...]. Assessment may also involve those from beyond the campus (alumni, trustees, employers) whose experience can enrich the sense of appropriate aims and standards for learning. Thus understood assessment is not a task for small groups of experts but a collaborative activity; its aim is wider, better informed attention to student learning by all parties with a stake in its improvement. (Astin *et al*, 1996, p.41)

### **Challenges and future developments**

By encouraging opportunities for students to work in project teams, for example during the curatorial section of this unit, emphasis is placed upon individual roles and aptitudes and how these contribute to a team. It is essential that students recognise the importance of each individual's skills when working in groups and value their own contribution.

This project shares responsibilities for learning between staff and students. Although situations are created and facilitated by staff, students are in the driving seat with regard to the success or failure of their experience. The book *Gatekeepers, Midwives and Fellow Travellers* presents a wonderful commentary on the 'craft and artistry of adult educators', in which Gerald Jones talks about how teachers:

remain an advocate for the material, whilst allowing a critical gap for learners to interrogate the material; position the material such that it becomes relevant, meaningful, memorable and accessible for learners, whilst not understating the potential challenges of fully grasping this material; learn alongside the learners, and

enable them to teach one another, whilst guiding and supporting the group and not letting it drift or unravel. (Jones, 2005, p.16)

The reputation of a university alone cannot attract the interest of external partners. Such vital connections are nurtured by staff and often stem from the close, personal business relationships with industry that exist in their work outside the institution. The unit project aims to help students understand the importance of cultivating such relationships from early on. The unit allows students to find their place, when working in a team and when approaching industry. But it also offers a way for the University to find its place within the breadth of a professional discipline and connect with a wider diversity of organisations, and for industry representatives to inform their practice by connecting with education and a new generation of creatives.

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### Biography

*Ellen Hanceri* is LCC's Academic Coordinator for Careers and Employability, and also a Senior Lecturer in Illustration and Print. She works with staff to open up opportunities for students to collaborate with industry and expand opportunities for their professional futures. Throughout her academic career at UAL she has continued her creative practice in printed surface design with clients such as Liberty Art Prints, Osborne and Little, Laura Ashley, White Stuff and Zoffany. Her research interests include: internationalization of the curriculum, global employability and collaborative print.