

Peter Nencini: Foundation Primer

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Teaching and Professional Fellowship 2006/7

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Proposal

To design and implement a pre-course 'primer' for students entering (or considering an application to) Camberwell Foundation (ft/pt); an interconnected online (VLE) and printed journal-forum-directory started at the point an offer is made. Also to implement a 'stripped down' model accessible to schools, colleges and other communities to consolidate, enhance and develop existent in/out/reach work (open days, portfolio advice days, teachers' days, summer schools). The motive is to widen access, raise achievement and support the aspirations and needs of an increasingly diverse cohort by:

- enabling students to acclimatise earlier to the reflective 'thinking-making' core practice of Foundation
- initiating a mutually supportive and critically active community where entry students from a range of backgrounds can exchange ideas; more relationships can be formed pre-course.
- providing a directory of resources; edited, accessible information on how exist as a practitioner in London and practical help on interview preparation and opportunities beyond FE.
- communicating pre-course and course events in order to maximise participation (PGCE student Jen Wei Tzu Franklin's research within our Pathway illustrates a correlation between achievement and gallery/cinema programme use).

Context:

UAL's Medium Term Strategy (2005-2010) intention to 'establish learner support environments that promote student retention and progression', to 'establish comprehensive and accurate pre-arrival information' and to 'target resources and facilities to support students from the point of enquiry onwards, in particular to meet the needs of under-represented and at risk students'.

HEFCE's 'Strategies for widening participation in higher education' (2001) refers to the 'student life-cycle'. This is applicable to FE within an HE organisation; the project would address the sequence encompassing 'aspiration raising', 'pre-entry activities', 'admission' and 'first term/semester'.

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Phases

The Fellowship was scheduled for a three-month block starting w/c 4 September and ending w/c 20 November 2006. The block was divided into three working phases: 'Root' (to explore and establish determining factors (pedagogical, logistical, technical) by interviewing university, college and external sources, representing Widening Participation, student cohort (focus group), student services, Student Support, academic team, international centre, ITRDU, Further Education programme, marketing and recruitment, administration), 'Content' (to research, compile and design structure and content of the Primer) and 'Test' (to upload and test Primer. Investigate, design and establish monitoring process for pilot year).

In practice 'Content' and 'Test' continued beyond the block because of the nature of the project. Content and structure have evolved (and continue to do so) as the college and course undergo changes and, crucially, as my understanding of web tools, functionality and culture develops.

I rejoined Foundation Course as Subject Leader two months into the three, splicing the remainder into the Spring and Summer terms. It proved to be more productive for the project because I was experimenting 'live' with content ideas for the Primer by starting up the Foundation Studies Blackboard site, using the Graphics specialist group of 60 students as a focus. For example, the relationship of online content to studio project content was tested. Each project comes with a studio 'package' of briefing with audio visual (powerpoint, keynote, etc.), workshops, demonstrations and seminars. The powerpoint documents without the energy and exchange of a live briefing are visually interesting but mute. We did not want to put poorly-attending students in the position of picking up studio content online and thinking that it would substitute being there. So the site project section was used as enrichment, with links to movies, forums, sites connected to the theme, developing ideas and methods delivered in the studio.

I also took up a new position as Senior Lecturer on BA(Hons) Illustration in January 2007 and set up a course Blackboard site. I was making the adjustment to co-ordinating a programme which does not require day-to-day attendance and consequently was able to learn a good deal about the VLE (virtual learning environment) as a communication tool for three year groups with distinct schedules of events and appointments. I have experimented recently with setting up major project weblogs (a project Primer if you like), well in advance of the start date and briefing; more on this in the 'Potential' section below.

The Primer was introduced to Foundation studies applicants on four portfolio review days running between 16 February and 9 March. I spoke to the group for 25 minutes using film-sound-image on

and offline. It was important for the session to feel like the first component of the Primer, expressing something of the process-emphasis and working excitement of Foundation. Included was a 'Draw' talk which encapsulated something of the exploratory making and thinking characteristic of the early part of the course. Feedback was good and will be quantified once the students attend and the focus group is formed. The log-in process was also explained. My sense was that, in the context of an application day, the candidates had little motive for taking in the access-process and that the information would need to be communicated again and from scratch in the offer letters.

I was asked to make presentations of the project to the University Admissions Programme team in January, the University Staff & Career Development Forum in February, Camberwell Senior Management team in June and to a three-college (Camberwell-Chelsea-Wimbeldon) FE conference group in July. Each event helped me to better understand the Primer in the context of University work on admissions, learning tools and the student experience. Comments were of great value and fed content decisions and, more recently, potential ideas.

The Foundation course has made approximately 540 offers. The 'joining instructions' letter, sent out in July, included a unique username and password for each potential student and a 'users' guide' with simple access instructions. This was followed by a group email to isolate the Primer information from everything else sent in the letter and to ensure users knew who to contact with queries. Evan Dickerson (ITRDU) and myself are responding to mails daily as this is written and I am noting recurrent issues for evaluation and revision in 07/08. Usage is also being monitored with the 'performance dashboard' Bb tool.

I am continuing to add content, particularly now related to enrolment and orientation, in order to support the students through the first few days of the course. The Primer content sections are covered below.

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Root

The project began as a series of interview-conversations with people representing the university and college organisations listed above in 'Root'. I had the premise as proposed but wanted to flesh out my understanding of particular students' needs on entering, or applying to, the course.

I also wanted to get a grip on current web thinking. This has proved to be a bigger part of the process than anticipated. The technical aspects are relatively simple (especially uploading to a content management system like Blackboard); the bigger challenge is to understand how the web works. Also, a VLE might be used by a range of people, some of whom are conversant with Web 2.0 applications (youtube, delicious, myspace,...) and some who have a little or no experience.

Notes were taken from the scheduled and impromptu conversations. Included here are some points which continued to resonate throughout the project. The first meeting was with a focus group of leaving Foundation students, a balance of age, background and gender.

Student focus group:

What's expected of me? What can I expect? The group discussed the abrupt change in style of course from their previous study (for example, the emphasis on process rather than finished work). They found themselves still making the adjustment weeks into the programme. Had they known what to expect in terms of delivery, work and assessment, they could have capitalised sooner (leading to the Primer's 'Do' and 'Make' sections).

Tom, a mature student wanted to know how he could *prepare for after the course before the course*. Foundation is very quick and functions as a bridging course to higher education; thinking and planning are crucial both for mature students with clear motives and (some) 18-year-olds who might be less concerned about progression (leading to the 'Plan' section).

Jackie McManus (project officer, Widening Participation):

People who are like me. Jackie's experience and advice, coming out of her work on choice, application and admission, has been invaluable. We discussed how the Primer might be an opportunity for applicants to identify themselves with the stories of ex-students from a range of backgrounds and experiences. Jackie introduced me to 'cultural capital' and we considered how to open up and encapsulate points of cultural reference and discussion on the site, in a way that would develop within the on-course community (leading to the 'Ex' section and additions to the 'Meet', 'Talk' and 'Look' sections).

In order to more substantively address widening participation, the Primer's proposed pre-interview version accessed by schools (and other) would let potential applicants in on what Foundation is 'really like'. This could be fleshed out by school visits, workshops and advice sessions (in the style of recent ICA portfolio events).

Evan Dickerson, Pete Hillier, Mike Kelly (ITRDU), Andy Stiff (Course Leader MA Digital Arts) and Frank Owusu (Tutor, Camberwell):

Two-way environment. At the beginning of the project I asked Evan what he thought 'instructors' were not doing with Blackboard. He felt that the sites as a rule were one-way pieces of communication.

Understanding *Web 2.0* became fundamental to the project because it characterised how the Primer (and Blackboard) could be built and assessed in terms of its use and potential. I didn't want to lose sight of my early reservations (coming from a design-for-print background) about the aesthetic limitations of Blackboard. It's qualities however became apparent as I was introduced by Evan and others to good practice (Bb Sandpit is recommended). The content management system allows for the setting up of a basic, functional site with audio-visual matter in a couple of hours or customisation (to a point) with use of cut-and-paste html, tables, etc.

Ultimately the approach evolved out of learning basic html, Dreamweaver, some

Flash and ImageReady to create something relatively visually engaging and coherent; a monitoring of related web applications, such as Wikipedia, Wordpress/Blogger, delicious, flickr, anything using RSS feeds, to understand how use is shifting and as new webtools appear; intuitive aspects are particularly interesting; for example 'Snap Shots' (www.snap.com) is a javascript tool that gives a visual preview in a pop-up window of a site when the user's cursor rolls over a hyperlink, allowing a glimpse of the link embedded in a paragraph without having to leave the webpage. It's compatible with well-known web applications. Some reservations still exist for me regarding the fluency and aesthetic of the interface but as a day-to-day tool Bb works.

Folksonomy (derived from 'folk' and 'taxonomy'). This was a term (attributed to information architect Thomas Vander Wal) to describe web-based collaborative classification (or *tagging*) of a body of information by the community of users; sharing user-generated content. In a looser sense the idea has been recurrent this year in and out of the project. It is applicable to the Primer ('Do' and 'Talk' interrelated) and to forming a unit or project. As mentioned earlier, I'm testing it out with a blog set up for BA Illustration's 'Play' project, which will be set formally in January 2008. Well before the project is set, a blog is started to archive findings, links, notes, observations on the theme. Comments, links are added by tutors and students. In a sense, although the project premise is set and led by lead tutor, the briefing is done by the community. This in no way obviates the expertise of the lead tutor but, in an ideal world, encapsulates the cultural experience and reference points of the group.

In terms of content, the key was realising that linking to web resources (e.g. www.ubu.com for experimental film and sound) is more powerful than over-packing the Primer with generic art and design content that can never match the detail of a specialist site. A part-portal. I was inspired by, for example, Everyone Forever and Dot-Dot-Dot magazine because they are loosely related to design but have a non-subject-specific, quirky range. It seemed to fit Foundation. I wanted to make the information that is on the Primer more local, more idiosyncratic and exploit the size and richness of the web. My intention longer term is to understand how tagging might help to categorise links and themes as they emerge.

Usage and access:

Ultimately the challenge for Bb sites is to reach the users. Last year's experience with the Graphics group showed that if the site is used in conjunction with live studio activity (and connected, supported in a way that makes sense) then it is used regularly by most of the group. For users that are not yet enrolled and attending as students, in the case of the Primer, the opportunities to 'sell' its use and to advise on access are limited. The process will be reviewed in due course. It appears as if the group email, supported by Evan and his team, had a significant effect because it was solely concerned with the Primer, it was timed when, post-A'levels, users are turning their thoughts to the course, and because the users could reply to myself or the linked Blackboard support for help.

At the beginning of the project a website with no log-in was considered for ease of access by

schools and other providers as well as candidates. We decided that the log-in would go hand-in-hand well with an offer and be a positive gesture towards the candidate. It would also offer some protection for those wishing to take part in the forums. Blackboard offers the possibility to send SMS text messages but this would be too intrusive, too pushy. Pete Hillier (ITRDU) took me through his work with podcasts and we discussed RSS feeds. The principle of a user subscribing to a feed which automatically downloads to her/his desktop is one that could be applied to the Primer and course Bb sites. Pete is also working to assemble a portfolio of podcasts to then propose that the University is licensed for an educational version of iTunes, accessible only through a log-in.

Interviews were held with Jackie McManus, Sylvia Bulloch (NALN), Evan Dickerson, Mike Kelly, Pete Hillier (ITRDU), Bill Watson (International Co-ordinator), David Webster (FE Programme Director), Christine Bowmaker (Learning Support), Andy Stiff (Course Leader MA Digital Arts), students of Camberwell Foundation, Linda Wheeler and Ian Thompson for early advice. Many valuable web-conversations with colleague Frank Owusu. Thanks to all.

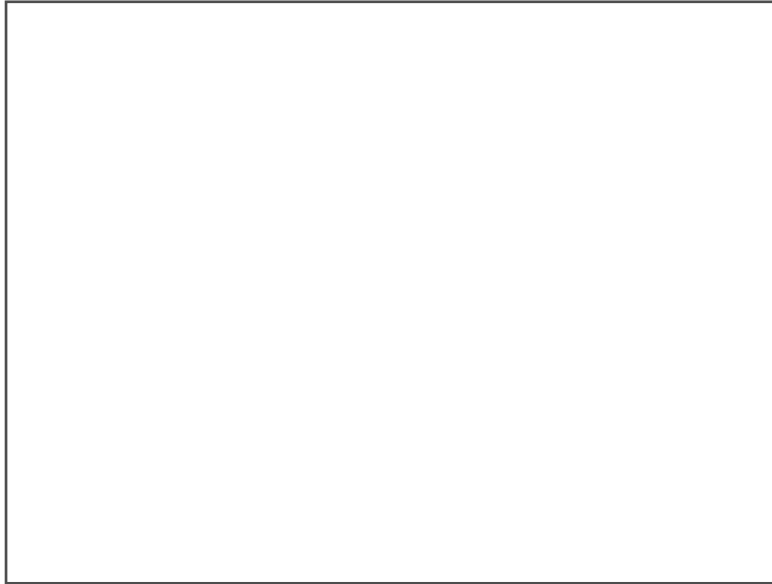
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Content

A brief overview (next page) of the Primer with screenshots, which may take a moment to load. The menu sections are simple verbs, intended to project something of the process-approach the course takes.

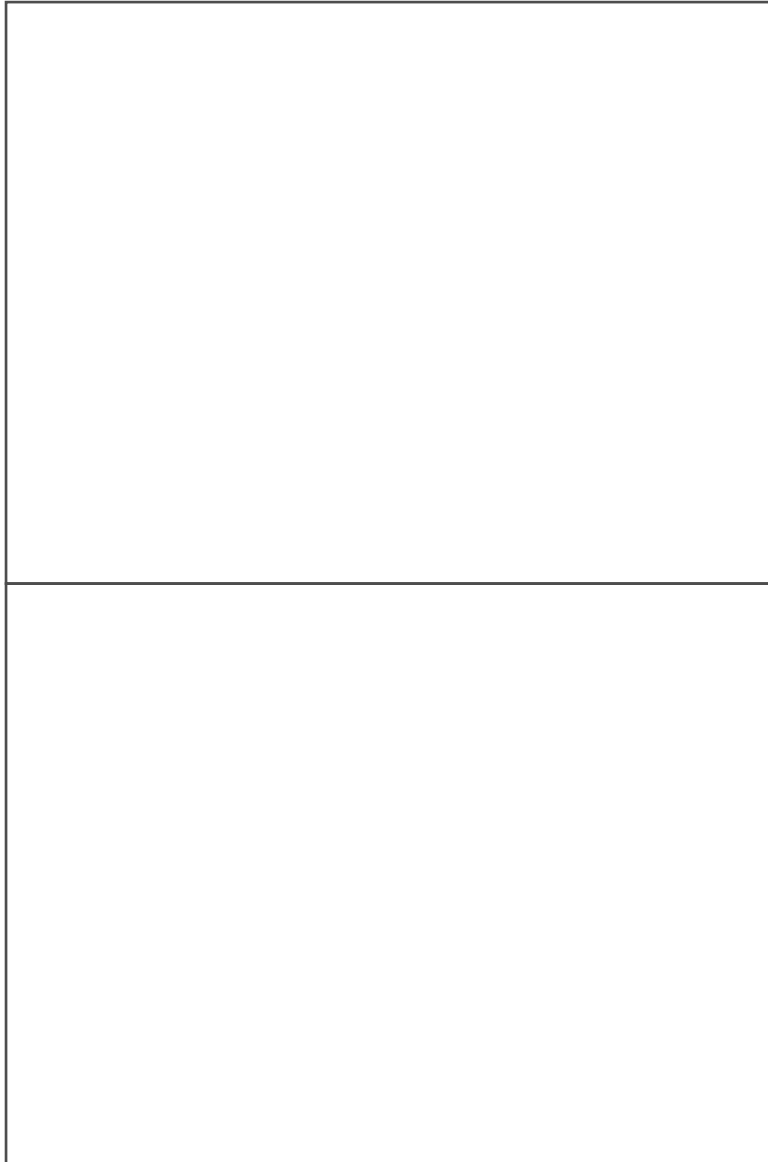
News:

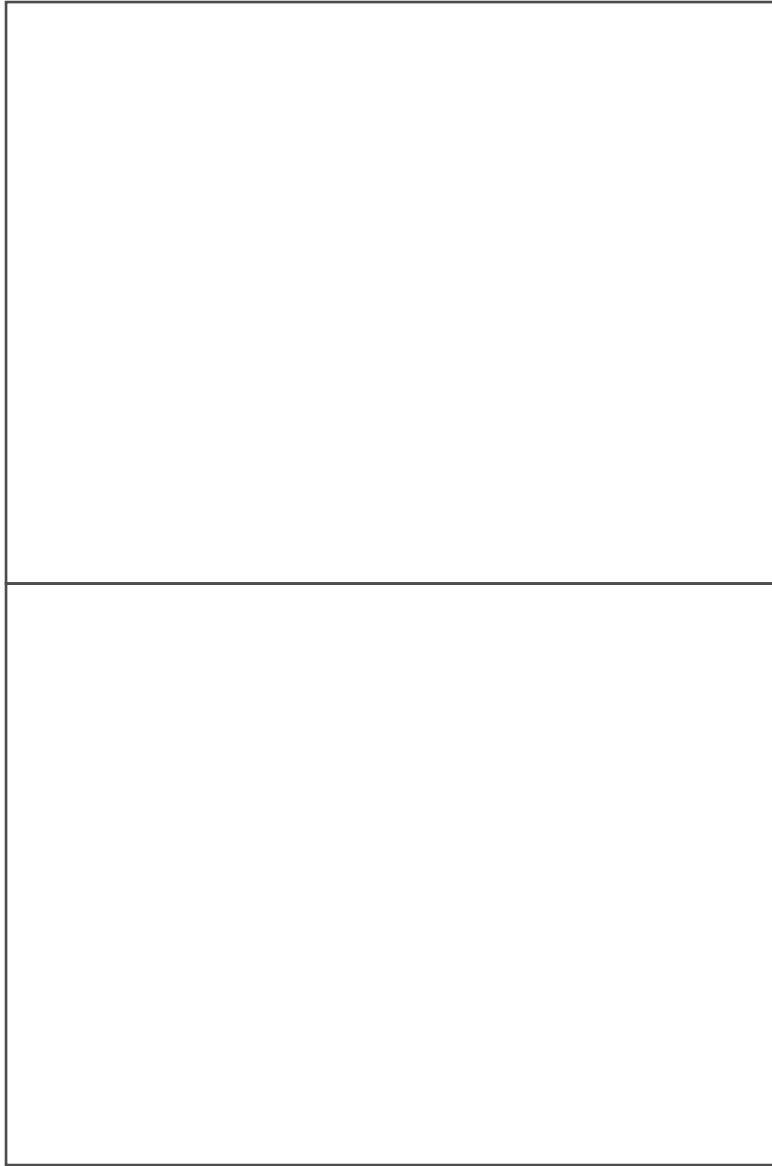
Introducing the Primer with links to the sections. The triangle-circle-square logotype is an animated .gif, with a nod to Bauhaus Foundation Course roots (Herbert Bayer's, Jan Tschichold's 'universal' alphabets) and optical RGB primaries. Within web limitations, Georgia seemed the most appropriate and at a large size for word-per-line readability.



Meet:

First stage group tutors introduced with individual short films answering the questions 'What are you looking at?', 'What are you reading?', 'What are you listening to?' and 'Where do you go?'. The answers are linked to relevant sites to find out more. Users are encouraged to give their answers in the 'Meet' forum.





Do:

Recommended creative activity. 'The motive here is for you to come into the course having started a sketch-work-book, a collection of visual material and a written journal of your ideas'.

A large empty rectangular box divided into three horizontal sections, intended for a sketch-work-book or journal.

Make:

Functioning as a blog, this section is giving examples of art-design practice and ideas related to the activity suggested in 'Do' and characteristic of core day-to-day

process. The longer term idea is to add content as it arrives in the forum ('Talk') from users.

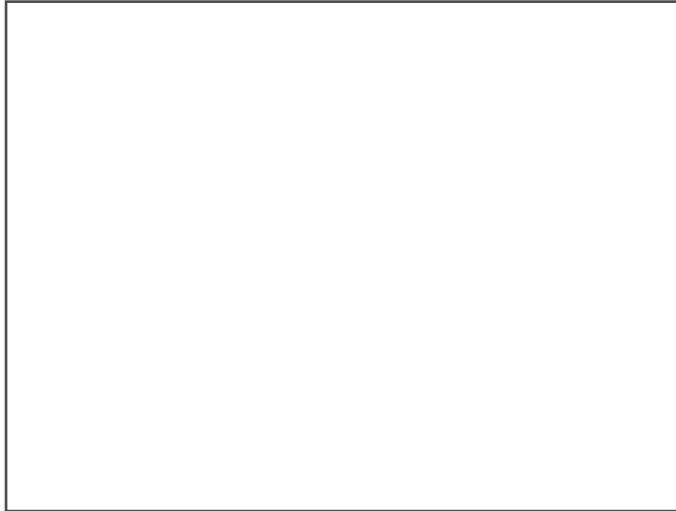
Talk:

Linked to the 'Meet', 'Do' and 'Make' sections. The uptake of this section will be subject to review. On-course Bb forums have not been particularly successful. This may be connected to the same reticence familiar in studio crits. I am interested in the idea that people would meet on the basis of their interests and enthusiasm rather than being limited by the group they find themselves in during the first eight weeks

of the course.

Plan:

Covering the major decisions each student will make on the course, with a calendar putting them in the context of the academic year, for an active, motive-led approach. This section, alongside others, will be copy-pasted to the on-course site for ongoing reference.



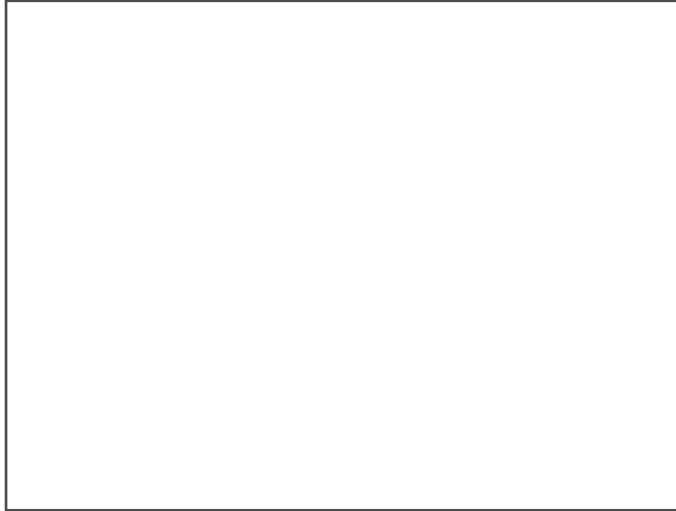
Look:

Addresses and links to materials, spaces, publications and websites, with an emphasis on London as a resource and a specialist, 'insider' guide to suppliers used by artists and designers who know the city.

Ex:

Interviews, stories from ex-students, using audio and text.

Questions include 'Why did you want to do Foundation?', 'How did your work develop on Foundation?' and 'What advice can you give somebody preparing for the course?'



The *Find*, *Contact* and *Start* sections are connected to orientation and enrolment, with maps, contact names and numbers for the start of the course.

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Evaluation

As proposed, a representative student focus group will be formed in the Autumn 2007 term to review the Primer. Staff will also be involved. To date, the relationship the Primer has to existing course and college recruitment and enrolment mechanisms needs review as it becomes a more visible, 'official' part of the programme.

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Potential

- A more developed design-relationship with the course logbook and Bb site, particularly the evaluative process. Customisable, downloadable pages, applicable to a number of (e.g. A5) folders or bindings, saving paper.
- Online enrolment system.
- Pre-interview version accessible to schools (and other), as proposed. The project has not yet developed in this form and would help engage WP issue.

- Animated, Flash-interactive maps and other user-oriented features to be developed for 'Find' section.
- Commercial? Camberwell SMT discussed applicability as an online course. In its current form the Primer is inextricably linked to live studio practice.