Teaching Fellowships

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Critical Thinking, Critical Theory: Cross-School First Year Module in Critical Analysis

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2 Critical thinking, Critical Theory: cross-School first year module in critical analysis

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Abstract

The objective of the project was threefold. Firstly, to propose a first year module entitled "Developing Critical Skills", to be available across Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT), which would promote, through the analysis of cultural artefacts, the analytical and rhetorical skills of first year students across different disciplines. Secondly, to test and evaluate appropriate assessment procedures for such a module. Thirdly, to explore innovative methods of curriculum design process for interdisciplinary learning. The anticipated benefits of such a module were originally imagined to be the development of students who would possess critical competences with broad application, who would be reflective and analytical, and who would develop awareness of the public responsibilities of knowledge. Further to this, the authors hoped to encourage a greater understanding among students of the value and complexity of culture, cross-disciplinary cooperation among staff teaching the module, and to consolidate the benefits of the modular system within the DIT.

Keywords: Critical Theory, critical thinking, interdisciplinarity

Project Outline

In the authors' experience as lecturers in Critical Theory in the School of Art, Design and Printing, our courses make up only 20% of the programmes on which we teach. While all staff teaching in third level education can certainly provide evidence of the lack of core literacy skills among school leavers, we would argue that the problem is more acute among Art and Design students. One of the principal difficulties that we face is the longstanding but often false dichotomy of theory and practice in Art and Design. Students expect to "do" art rather than engage in criticism and analysis. Our students demonstrate skills in criticism and analysis, but they are not necessarily aware that is what they do. In addition, by prioritising practice, their respective disciplines often obstruct any explicit formalisation of these skills and how they might be taught.

In light of this situation, we believe it is no longer sufficient for students to develop only single discipline expertise. What is more, further skills are needed than those orientated to the demands of the labour market, if a student is to take on the responsibilities of active citizenship and reflective practice in the world. To confidently meet problems and opportunities presented by the latter, a student must have knowledge of the methods of logical enquiry, argumentation and reasoning, and must develop competence in applying these methods. There is an urgent requirement to develop integrated curricula that forcefully promote these methods.

We have already begun to teach these methods diffusively and often informally. The purpose of this project is to assess the feasibility of an explicit formalised delivery of these competences.

In interviews and discussions with first year students across all the disciplines that include Critical Theory in their programmes in the School of Art, Design and Printing, we asked the following questions.

- What is, in your opinion, Critical Theory?
- What were your expectations of Critical Theory, if any, prior to college?
- What preparation is necessary for a first year student beginning Critical Theory?
- What preparation is provided, if any, by Leaving Certificate syllabi?
- What skills have you learnt in Critical Theory? What do you want to learn more?
- Are the evaluation criteria for Critical Theory legible and apt?
- How do you see the overlap of practical and theoretical skills?

In order to formulate these questions, roundtable discussions were held with colleagues from Critical Theory and from the various studios of the School. These discussions indicated in particular a belief among studio staff that first year students were unaware of the requirements of Critical Theory or of its relevance to their development as a practitioner. Our discussion with the students confirmed this view.

In more detail, we found that almost all students identified Critical Theory as a set of specific, transferable skills. As one student put it: "the basic skills you need for being in college as opposed to school, ... you're not like fed all the information, you're not given everything, you have to work a lot of it out for yourself."

The majority of first year students mentioned that they had not expected to do Critical Theory as part of their practical course, whether in design or fine art. Some had expected to "do art history", but were prepared to "learn things off and then be tested on them". All felt that the prospectus and open days did not indicate the style of learning that they would encounter in college. They suggested that it would be helpful for prospective applicants to see samples of first year work in Critical Theory.

Their experience of learning by rote in secondary school proved problematic when it came to attendance; "some people" relied on notes on webcourses rather than coming to class where they would benefit from discussion and explanation, which then led to problems when attempting to do assignments.

Students frequently used the metaphor of language to explain how they came to understand Critical Theory over the course of the first year. Describing the process of unpacking an essay brief one student said: "It's like when you go to a different country where they speak the same language, but they have different expressions – like when people come here they might not understand what 'grand' means – there's things that they phrase that you might not understand at first." This alerted us to the assumptions we make when using words like "critique" and "analyse".

Students were clear that they did not think there was room in the current first year timetable for another stand-alone module. Instead, they would prefer to have more time in the existing modules to be dedicated to "learning the language" of Critical Theory.

They were acutely aware of the different understanding of "knowledge" in second and third level essay writing. One student summarised the difference thus: "In school it's just your opinion. Here it's more interesting; it's your opinion of other people's opinions!"

Our findings have forced us to re-evaluate the scope of the project, insofar as the problem of a lack of knowledge or misunderstanding of Critical Theory is more widespread than first believed and a good deal of basic education is needed before attempting anything so sophisticated as a cross-School module. We need first to explain Critical Theory – its rationale, its vocabulary, and its application. Once these foundations have been laid, we hope that a cross-School module in Critical Theory will make more sense to students.

Recommendations

The authors would like to make the following recommendations.

1. During the applications process it must be made clear to students that Critical Theory forms a central requirement of all programmes.

2. An introduction to Critical Theory ought to be included in Induction week.

3. As Critical Theory staff have to teach both the content of their modules and fundamental skills necessary to complete them – grammar and spelling; skills of presentation, oral and written; reasoning and argumentation; analytical skills; and even the ethics of their respective disciplines – the allocation of teaching hours should be increased from one hour per week to at least two.

4. Fundamental skills training is most effective in small group workshops, and must be timetabled accordingly.

5. Since a great deal of Critical Theory modules are available as optional modules, adequate and effective technology must be available in order to facilitate selection.

For the future, our priority is to develop a pilot programme for Induction week. This will form the basis of the full cross-School module to be developed and implemented in Autumn 2013.

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