

Creative Space; or Is There Room for Creativity? – an evaluation of the module ‘Visual Research Methods’

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Summary and Introduction

This paper builds upon a curriculum evaluation and development project that focused on an individual module within the Foundation Degree (FDA) in Interior Design at London Metropolitan University in 07/08. The project was entitled “Creative space; or is there room for creativity? An evaluation of *Visual Research Methods* (DEIF01C)” and was initiated at a point of change in the course – the transition from HND to FDA. This shift brought new requirements, context and focus that demanded an overhaul of the existing curriculum. The concern was that the demands of the new programme risked an approach to curriculum that focused on measurable skills and competencies neglecting key ‘soft’ skills and space for the development of students as individual creative practitioners. The process of the evaluation raises issues that are relevant in a broader context in terms of the role of Foundation Degrees within Higher Education both as completion level qualifications and as progression routes.

Context: the Foundation Degree

Foundation Degrees are a key element in the government’s widening participation, skills and life-long learning education agenda (QAA, 2004). They are proposed as “degree level qualifications designed with employers and combine academic study with workplace learning to equip people with the relevant knowledge, understanding and skills to improve performance and productivity.” (www.findfoundationdegree.co.uk, 2007).

The emphasis of the Foundation Degree websites, and the Benchmark Statement from the QAA (2004) is the provision of “Knowledge, understanding and skills that employers need” (QAA, 2004, P.5). Although the possibility of, and the routes that are available to continue within Higher Education are described and explored in some depth, the ‘marketing’ focus of the qualification seems to be that “Foundation Degrees are intended to provide the knowledge and skills that are necessary to enable employees to be versatile and adaptable in progressing to and within work”

(QAA, 2004, P6). This is confirmed through the generic outcomes of the Foundation Benchmark, adapted closely from the FHEQ Intermediate level statement but adding an explicit reference to work to almost every statement. (QAA, 2004, online)

The Foundation Degree programmes within AMD at London Metropolitan University are not run with partner employers. The Foundation Degree in Interior Design does not explicitly address 'work' or 'employers/employees needs' in the written course aims or learning outcomes. Work-based learning at Certificate level is embedded in 2 modules, Visual Communication and Architectural Drawing, through project work based on the intended (future) work role (London Metropolitan University, 2007, p18). At intermediate level work based learning is embedded in 'live' briefs. I do not mean to imply that the course does not address professional requirements, and prepare students for the workplace, merely that there is a marked difference in emphasis between the Foundation Degree documents and the programme descriptors.

Context: creativity

My emphasis on creativity builds on earlier research (Qualmann, 2008) that developed an argument that consideration of creativity is a route to effective teaching and learning environments and a student centred experience, as well as being essential to the discipline of Interior Design. Group research (Flint et al, 2008) established that creativity is slippery, both as a term and a concept, and must be defined in terms of industry associations (as well as level of study, programme, course and module). This is key when considering the employability goals of the foundation degree, and the requirement for it to function as a stand-alone qualification.

Creativity within the discipline of Interior Design is highly valued, and key to success in a future career. "Creativity and innovation are at the core of design" (IFI, 2006, online). When proposing the conversion of the course from HND to Foundation Degree the course leader undertook industry consultations and compiled an employer 'wish list' of skills and capabilities. Four of the eleven statements were found to include reference to creativity, either implicitly (through the description of creative processes) or explicitly. The others relate to skills and technical abilities, knowledge of software and familiarity with conventions of the discipline.

In the written curriculum for the programme in question creativity is explicitly present in one of the aims: "creative and critical thinking, self-expression and a capacity for independent study" (London Metropolitan University, 2007). At module level it is expressed in the Learning Outcomes as "students will be able to demonstrate an imaginative and creative approach to visual expression".

The meaning of creativity within the specific context is important to define – both

verbally/textually and through practice and exemplars. Conceptions of creativity that are pedagogically relevant were explored in the course of earlier research (Qualmann, 2008), and included:

- my own perceptions of creativity – its meaning to me as a practitioner in the field of fine art
- Wallas' 1926 stages of creativity (cited by Dickhut, 2003) 'activated' through rewording to become: 1. *preparation* or collecting information, 2. *incubation* or considering information, 3. *illumination* or developing information and 4. *verification* or producing and evaluating.
- Cowdroy and de Graaf's (2005) work on assessing 'highly' creative ability in relation to renowned professional practitioners asserts a conception of creativity that values the idea as the highest order of creativity and argues that criteria for evaluating creativity must be set by the creator in relation to the original concept for the work.
- Acts of making as creating, and therefore creative (Fennell, 1993 cited by, and built on by Kleiman, 2005).

To address these conceptions of creativity in a curriculum framework we must then provide opportunity for preparation and incubation (in my 'activated' sense) and introduce methods and processes that allow space for developing ideas through doing. We need to be explicit about these steps, and these conceptions of creativity. In considering the level of the module and the student profile we also need to provide opportunities to explore and discuss intentionality with relation to exemplars and actively develop students ability to reflect on, and voice, their ideas and intentions.

These conceptions of creativity also link directly to the statements from the employer consultation in "the ability to conceptualise through drawing", "the ability to verbalise their ideas and concepts" and "do they have a creative and active through pattern?"

Context: the student profile

Students on the FDA programme, as with the predecessor course, may not have a history of academic achievement. The entry requirements are low, and flexible. Students are interviewed with a portfolio of creative work (drawing, photography, etc). A small number of students slip through this system and are accepted onto the course through clearing without interview. A small but consistent number of students (3 this year in a cohort of 26) are mature 'career-change' students who have worked previously in a diverse range of occupations – for example as teachers, accountants and bus drivers. A similar consistent group of mature students are those who want to transfer an interest in soft furnishing or interior decoration into a more formal avenue of study – and career. The key shift in student profile from HND to FDA is the increase in the number of school leavers applying direct.

Collins and Amabile (1999) consider the importance of motivation in relation to creativity, and find it to be vital. Their discussion considers intrinsic motivation to be the most beneficial, or conducive to creativity, although they do allow that extrinsic motivation may not harm creativity in some contexts. However what we seem to be dealing with is high levels of amotivation – students who “do not really know why they are at university, think themselves incompetent and feel that they have little control over what happens to them” (Deci and Ryan, 1985, cited by Newstead and Hoskins, 2003, p.64).

Do we therefore need to adjust (lower our expectations) of the types of creativity that we encourage, develop and reward, due to restrictions in time and resources and the students entry level capabilities, and levels of motivation? Could we prioritise key features of creativity as defined through employer consultations, theory and the needs of the specific student cohort? Although we cannot of course change the level descriptors that relate to the programme (Moon, 2002) we are dealing with a first year, first semester module, rather than a programme level one, so the possibility to ‘take a step back’ and try to address basic level skills and abilities that make future creativity possible may be the only feasible proposal. This of course raises the problem that has been suspected from the start - that the curriculum must address the widening participation agenda of the award, rather than just the admissions policy (Tynan, 2006).

Methods of evaluation: developing and applying a process.

The evaluation of the module in question was conducted using a method adapted from Biggs’ (1999) steps in the constructive alignment process combined with Moon’s (2002) process mapping for module development, with additional reference to Jackson’s HEA imaginative curriculum project regarding creativity. External, local and student perspectives were considered in turn; examining the wider goals of the (fairly new) qualification, the institutional context and the student experience. Student evaluation of the module was conducted using standard departmental forms, and an additional email questionnaire.

My evaluation began with a visual mapping of the module using Moon’s 2002 process mapping for module development. This method was selected due to its ‘spiral’ or evolutionary approach, as opposed to a linear model. The idea of a spiral rather than a line occurs regularly in pedagogic theory, in Schon’s (1983) description of the reflective practitioner, in Kolb’s (1984) experiential learning cycle, and in various models of creativity and creative process too, and appeals to me in that it recognises the iterative nature of the process, as each factor in the evaluation is considered against each element of the curriculum in turn.

As a starting point Moon’s model considers the two key inputs to be the relevant level descriptors, and the aims of the module - against which learning outcomes, assessment criteria, assessment methods and the teaching strategy are checked for

'fit'. The first point raised by this process is the difficulty in linking generic level descriptors to subject specific aims and outcomes. Moon's model is used to check on paper that links between these key features of the curriculum are in place, and could be considered to cover Biggs' (1996, 1999) process for constructive alignment within curriculum.

Jackson's (2002) proposals for creative curricula are next considered as overlays in the mapping process, as are student feedback, feedback from colleagues and incidental feedback (Hounsell, 2003) as well as comments from the external examiner, and the industry consultations that took place during the development of the programme.

The visual mapping process demonstrated that sound relationships are in place within the module in question in terms of matching the level (Certificate) with the learning outcomes, which in turn serve the aims of the module. The learning outcomes are addressed in the assessment methods, and reflected in the assessment criteria, the teaching strategy is also found, through this process to provide opportunities (situations) "likely to elicit the required learnings" (Biggs, 1996, p.360). Although these relationships are sound the process reveals a lack of clarity in the wording of some of the statements which it seems would benefit from re-writing to make explicit their links, and to improve communication with students (Moon, 2002).

Although on paper the module fares well in this evaluation method, the focus of my enquiry – creativity – is not explicitly addressed with this model. An 'overlay' was then introduced that sought to identify indicators of creativity as defined by Jackson (2007) and earlier research (Flint et al 2008), within the elements included in the initial evaluation (level descriptors, module aims, learning outcomes, assessment methods, assessment criteria and teaching strategy). Both terms (words) indicative of creativity, and activities conducive to creativity were considered. Level descriptors at 'C' level and at programme ('I') level were found to have no explicit reference to creativity, however where references to 'field of study' and 'approaches to solving problems' are made I feel we can infer a requirement for creativity from a subject perspective. The module aims and learning outcomes contain a number of key terms, including *exploration*, *development*, *reflection* and *imagination*, as do the assessment criteria. The module grade descriptors contain references in the higher categories, with no indicator terms present in the 'pass' threshold statement.

These references are important – if we want to encourage, develop and reward creativity it must be present in every aspect of the curriculum, both as it is written and 'lived'. But how these 'indicator' terms translate into the reality of everyday teaching and learning activities is affected by other factors. The activities or the 'site' of the learning is dependent on cooperation, participation, by the specific student cohort, and by resourcing (namely time).

The incidental feedback (Hounsell, 2003) in the form of the work produced by students on the module reveals success and failure in terms of the goal of encouraging and developing creativity. Setting to one side those students whose attendance was very poor and who did not submit, the work produced as a coursework portfolio (worth 45% of the module mark) was generally poor. Although almost all submissions met the assessment criteria very few demonstrated any development, individual experimentation or other indicators of creativity.

The final project fared slightly better with most students (who submitted work) showing evidence of creative process and successful production of a creative output. It is possible that the cumulative effect of the learning sequence had made a difference by this point (the final project runs from week 10 – 13 – which is actually 6 calendar weeks due to the winter break). However it must also be possible that the tasks and activities, the ‘exercises’ of the early part of the module were not conducive to creativity.

These activities, or exercises, are proscriptive – they set out to force students to try something new – in terms of media or approach – to drawing, writing, visualising, mark making, or modelling and to challenge student perceptions. I also want them to produce a lot of work, to build a toolkit of both media and approaches – to representation and to ideas. My intention at this early stage of the module (the first 6 weeks) is to “develop knowledge and understanding retrospectively after they have engaged with a process (emergent approach with emphasis on learning through reflection)” Jackson (2002, appendix 2). Though perhaps its ‘failure’ with this cohort suggests that this may actually be encouraging a ‘surface’ approach (Marton and Saljo, cited by Fry et al. 2003) as they complete the externally imposed task without engaging. This might be remedied by a more explicit beginning, in which the goals of the exercises are explained and discussed in relationship to creativity and their other purposes, establishing the context of meaning required for ‘deep’ learning (Marton and Saljo, cited by Fry et al. 2003). It is also possible that the exercises are effective but the reflection required to make sense of them is not allowed enough time, or is not facilitated – or indeed that this process make not take place within the time frame of the module.

Student feedback in this respect also presents contradictions – for example the feedback indicates a good understanding of the module’s learning outcomes and assessment criteria – yet work submitted for assessment in many cases indicated that these had not been clearly comprehended. The analysis of this data reveals key problems in the design of the module feedback questionnaire, where the differing use of the likert scale boxes requires students to pay close attention to each question before ticking the box correlating to their response.

Feedback from colleagues, and my evaluation of students work suggests that the module is content heavy. My desire to construct an intensive learning sequence

perhaps conflicts here with a teaching strategy that is feasible in terms of resourcing, and realistic in consideration of the student profile. Additionally research into learning environments conducive to creativity shows that time and space in which to reflect, and 'incubate' ideas is essential – which my current sequence does not necessarily allow for. (Jackson 2007)

The attendance drop off that occurred mainly from week 6 onwards is also of concern, and relates to the poor performance of students in the final assessment. In discussion with colleagues teaching concurrent modules an interim assessment, in which several students received low marks, was identified as a possible contributing factor to this. An approach has now been agreed for semester one interim assessments that focuses on detailed feedback, proposing individual consultations with students who are deemed to be failing, but with no grades being awarded.

One factor for creativity that is not possible to address within this programme is student choice between modules (Jackson et al 2007, Knight, 2002). The constraints of the qualification – achieving an industry-ready stand-alone qualification in 2 years - means that much in terms of content is both prescribed and proscribed. Although such a weakness can be addressed by providing opportunity for choice in tasks within modules I think it is also countered by the benefits of a coherent programme – the possibility of a sense of a course rather than a sequence of modules, which may be more meaningful in relation to subject benchmarks and programme level aims and outcomes (Yorke, 2002). Additionally it provides possibility for a level of communication, discussion, and adjustment across the programme.

Conclusions from the evaluation and implications for practise:

Amabile (1996) cited by Jackson (2002, p.7) describes a set of requirements for creativity as “Domain specific knowledge, creativity relevant skills, creativity relevant processes, task motivation and personal autonomy”

Following this evaluation the module can be considered (alongside the entire first year, first semester programme) as a pre-cursor or introductory learning sequence that develops creativity relevant skills and processes, and personal autonomy – building a foundation for 'being creative' as an interior designer.

The proposed redesign for the module reduces content, prioritising activities that can be explicitly linked to concurrent modules and programme level aims (Tynan, 2006) and making space for facilitated reflection. It also includes a course-wide decision to hold final crits (assessment) in week 11 (before the winter break) enabling the provision of feedback to students, and the opportunity to improve work before the official assessment deadline in week 13 (5 weeks later). This proposal was conceived of in order to address high failure rates, but also provides an additional formative assessment opportunity for students who choose to action their feedback.

Returning to the question asked at the start of this project – ‘is there room for creativity?’ I think it is safe to say as a result of this evaluation that yes, there must be and there is. Although it could be said that I have demonstrated what was already tacitly known, the process of making it explicit, and verifying it through an evaluation method builds a stronger base from which to defend and develop my standpoint. Smith-Bingham, (2007, p.14) remarks “The value of creativity cannot easily be demonstrated, and therefore justified as an end in itself, in an audit culture”. I hope through this project to have demonstrated that consideration of creativity is a vital element, alongside many other factors and requirements, of this module, and this course.

Foundation degrees present a challenge in their requirement to match the level of BA programmes whilst serving the distinctly different purpose of being ‘work ready’ in 2 years. Is there then an irreconcilable conflict between the dual requirements of progression to final year BA, and work-readiness?. The answer then – if there is one – can only come from tackling that key question faced by all HE curriculum designers – and that is, “What is higher education for?”

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Biographical Note

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