

AN EXAMINATION OF STUDENT FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT AND FACE TO FACE FEEDBACK IN STUDIO-BASED DESIGN EDUCATION & ITS RELATIONSHIP TO STUDENTS' LEARNING EXPERIENCES

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Abstract

Over the last two decades we have seen the designer's role and brief broaden. Through the introduction of the personal computer, the Internet and wireless technology and social networking, we all have experienced dramatic changes, especially in our rapport with space, time, the physicality of objects, and ourselves as individuals. Today, with the expansion in student numbers and a reducing resource in Higher Education how the studio-based design pedagogic community responds and adapts its teaching and learning methodologies in response to these rapid developments and effectively utilises feedback opportunities to inform curriculum is key in ensuring that students understand and are equipped for the profession they are entering.

Although there has been a good deal of literature around feedback, assessment and learning in pedagogic research in Higher Education – (Askew & Lodge, 2000; Baume, Yorke & Coffey, 2004; Biggs, J. 2003; Black & William, 2003; Harlen & James, 1997; Rust, 2002) together with a growing research body of work around assessment and feedback in studio-based art and design (Austerlitz & Aravot, 2002; Blair, 2003/2004/2006/2007/2009; Davies, 2000/2002; Crooks, 2001; Edstrom, 2008; Shreeve, Baldwin, Faraday, 2003; Blythman & Orr, 2005; Orr, 2007) students do not seem to have a common definition of feedback - when they are receiving this and how this informs their learning. What is it about the particular nature of studio-based design learning and teaching which continues to fuel this debate?

The UK National Student Survey (NSS) - a questionnaire filled in by all final year undergraduate students about their learning experiences on their course – indicates that across all disciplines there are issues in relation to feedback and assessment and art and design students, in particular report they do not think they get enough feedback. These issues could be around structures and processes we use such as the relationship of assessment strategies to learning outcomes and may be about faculty and student perceptions and understanding as well as actual practices.

This paper shares the reported findings of a small research project, funded by the UK Art, Design & Media Subject Centre of the Higher Education Academy (ADM-HEA) exploring student assessment delivered through both the formative and ipsative feedback available to students. The project was researched and analysed by myself and my colleague Allan Davies.

Key Words: *feedback, assessment, understanding, interpretation*

Introduction

Teaching involves gaining students' understandings in order to further their understanding. (Knewstubb, B. & Bond, C.2009: 180)

This small one year project, was researched by myself and my colleague Allan Davies who has written widely on assessment in Art & Design. The project was funded by the Art, Design & Media Subject Centre of the UK Higher Education Academy (ADM-HEA). The project explores how student assessment in art and design is delivered through the formative and ipsative feedback mechanisms available to students. We wanted to take a 'snap shot' of how the discipline areas of art and design

currently ensure that students understand and learn from the formative feedback they are given in relation to their project/module learning outcomes? This paper reports on the project and findings which are published in the online ADM-HEA Networks magazine and will be available on their website. www.adm-heacademy.ac.uk

Previous research studies carried out both within and outside the art and design sector, (Blair, 2006; 2008; 2010; Davies, 2000; 2002; Crooks, 1988; Fleming, 1998; Kent, 2005; Oak, 1998; Sadler, 2005; Askew & Lodge, 2000; Baume, Yorke & Coffey, 2004; Biggs, J. 2003; Black & Wiliam, 2003; Harlen & James, 1997; Rust, 2002) find that there can remain confusion and often a different interpretation of feedback by students and teachers.

Cannatella (2001:319) suggests that this could be because;

The particular character and activity that goes into making of art does not fit comfortably into any system of general assessment criteria.

The project investigated how we, as discipline academics, are ensuring assessment feedback is testing and also ensuring enhanced student learning?

Formative assessment and feedback is a well-established and integrated part of art and design curricula. The atelier model, where a small group of students work closely with an artist or designer in order to develop their skills and knowledge, has been characteristic of student learning in art and design for many centuries. With the explosion of art schools in the UK and Europe after World War 2, the 'crit' became a recognised form of providing critical engagement (Blair, 2008; Blair, 2010; Percy, 2004) and of providing feedback for students, particularly for those in larger groups. What distinguishes the 'crit' from other forms of feedback is the public display of student work that enables accessibility and an opportunity for others, not just the teacher and student, to engage in discussion of the work. A less formalised strategy for critical feedback in art and design, which appears peculiar to the discipline, was 'studio cruising' (Ashton, P, 1997; Swann, 2002) where the tutor makes him or herself available for informal discussion during an ongoing project. Here usually the student initiates the conversation when they require feedback on their concepts or processes.

Although feedback in the disciplines has been a long established practice, formalization came during the end of the last century (1998-2000) when subject reviewers for the UK Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) started asking how students were supported in their learning. This revealed that art and design was well prepared to provide formative support but that the concept was not always fully understood.

Studio-based activities are a key feature valued highly by students and staff. They provide for regular individual tuition and promote an informal but intensive interactive learning environment. Close working relations are engendered in studio situations, with staff and students sharing experiences as equals in the discussion of individual students' projects or practice. A distinctive feature of the subject is the group critique, where students present and discuss their work with their peers and tutors. These, and the individual tutorials that also address current visual work, facilitate reflective learning and the development of key skills. This integration of key skills and subject-specialist material promotes effective learning. However, the reviewers express concerns that students do not always understand these arrangements for the development of key skills, and the criteria for assessing these skills. (QAA Subject Overview Report: Art and Design 1998-2000)

More recently with the explosion in student numbers together with a more diverse population of student experience/skills – due to the demise of many foundation diploma pre degree courses, traditional practices have been difficult to implement. Peer and self-assessment strategies have been adopted sometimes more as coping strategies which utilise the manpower of the students to complete the assessment rather than being perceived as a strategy for improving learning. The use of technology has also come to play an important part in supporting formative feedback for students.

These strategies have not always been successful – the National Student Survey (NSS), a questionnaire survey done by all UK final year degree students about their course experience, has highlighted that in Art and Design there remain issues in relation to feedback and assessment in the sector that need to be investigated and addressed.

The project

The methodology we used was two-fold. We sent out an online questionnaire to all art and design staff on all the sector mailing lists in the UK as well as our individual contacts. This was very well responded to and also resulted in some telephone and face to face conversations with individual staff who wanted to share their practice and thoughts. We also carried out some small focused studies. Three art and design institutions were selected and interviews were held with groups of staff and students in these institutions.

From the questionnaire, we asked teachers about how they monitored the student learning experience. From their responses, together with responses in interviews, we were able to construct a set of basic categories which identified both formal and informal approaches within both individual and group scenarios.

	Formal	Informal
Individual	Regular mini-reviews Tutorials Strictly documented visual progression One-to-one meeting at end of semester Personal Supervisor system Short explanatory /reflective texts Reflective journal/diary	Discussions with individuals Review folios Conversations at the end of lectures/studio Self-reflective exercises
Group	Module questionnaires Short formative surveys Staff/student liaison committees Programme committees MEQs (Module Evaluation Questionnaires) at end of module External examiner comments NSS (National Student Survey) Group seminars Peer-support	Informal discussions with students Staff/student focus groups Teaching teams discuss how projects are fairing Pathway forum meetings Mid module feedback sessions Discussion forums on Study Space

Table 1: Range of monitoring elicited through responses

In asking teachers how they know that students have understood the feedback they have received, we found there were a number of basic structural variations.

Non-structural	Semi-structural	Structural
We don't have a way of doing this Not as effectively as we could Difficult, the only check is another formative feedback point Not sure we do	Usually through one-to-one tutorials Discuss it with them Student blogs Peer debate Discussion in individual and group tutorials Set aside feedback time to ask them questions Ask students to explain what the feedback was about Observe and monitor group discussions Brain storming/mind mapping Evidence in their work	Followed up at next tutorial Feedback form includes a 'what I did next' section One-to-one tutorials specific to feedback Subject tutorials Invite student to submit a plan of action Summary discussion post delivery Invitation to query feedback in tutorials In crits here, written feedback is discussed End of semester individual tutorials Discussion of notes following previous tutorial

Table 2: Variation of checking student understanding

When asked whether there were other issues related to formative feedback they would like to share, respondents appeared to formulate their answers from either a student focus (it was a problem for the students) or a teacher focus (it was a problem for the teacher).

Student focus	Teacher focus
Occasionally, students respond to feedback as directive, particularly if the comments are made by senior staff or an external visitor. Identifying how certain skills are key skills for employability Informal feedback is crucial to my teaching – keeps lessons fresh Written feedback is not always understood by the students – can be demoralising Time Students need to know that they are receiving formative feedback or they don't know what it is Ensuring staff are fair and treat students equally	Large projects can involve lengthy feedback Increasing student numbers is a problem The language can be too formal Inappropriate forms used by university can be counterproductive in art and design Written feedback is not always understood by the students – can be demoralising Time Multi-sensory feedback (They) muck up crits and assessments

Table 3: Student focus and teacher focus issues

Understanding of formative assessment

The analysis showed that students understand both the term 'formative assessment' and its meanings in varying ways. Some students interviewed claim not to know about it until the practice is described to them. Occasionally, they recognize it under some other expression such as 'interim' assessment or it might be embedded within the familiar critique practices and not specifically identified. Other students recognize the term immediately since the expression is used quite explicitly as a feature of their learning.

'I don't know if it's because we've been introduced to the word like formative feedback, but XXX was like, ok this is your formative feedback '

Teachers, themselves are sometimes cautious about using terms explicitly:

'We don't mention the word assessment at any point but basically, we say to students put an exhibition of your work up in that room and then, as a group, they look at the work, the tutor leads a student discussion about the work as well. '

Nevertheless, when the broad features of the practice are outlined to them, some students still express uncertainty about feedback's purpose and value.

'I don't think they grade it, but they will tell you verbally, like if you carry on at this level you will probably get this grade, or you can improve and get another grade. That's what I would have thought it was. '

'...it can be a form of scare tactic to basically get the student to get their arse into gear.'

Feedback and marking

Formative assessment is conventionally seen as a support device to help students to reflect on where they are and what they have to do to successfully complete the project. The use of marks in the formative process is therefore somewhat controversial. Some teachers have rationalized this in their approach to assessment and feedback;

'..because I think there's a danger with formative assessment that, if you do give it a kind of mark, I think you could lose that guidance aspect to it, because it is a guidance. It is a kind of thing you could develop a bit better, whereas if you are trying to give it a mark then you can't; you have to be critical there and then. It's not formative then, it becomes summative.'

However in some instances marks or grades are utilized, as revealed by this student;

'So at the crit you'd get verbal feedback from the tutor and whoever else was running the project, and your peers, and then on the next day...there'd be listed everyone's names, a little sentence or two next to your name, and then your formative grade. So you could go, I don't really need to re-do that project cause I got a Pass Grade or I have to look at that one again cause I got an excellent so ...'

There is also the danger of students' taking a strategic position as the comment below illustrates.

You always want to see what everyone else has got to compare yourself with other people. And then from that you just start getting obsessed with the grade and not how you can get that better grade. I think if we had, as XXX said, kind of a written thing as well, or even just scrap the grades and just give us the written feedback.

Feedback, outcomes and assessment

If students are to learn desired outcomes in a reasonably effective manner, then the teacher's fundamental task is to get students to engage in learning activities that are likely to result in their achieving those outcomes....It is helpful to remember that what the student does is actually more important in determining what is learned than what the teacher does. (Shuell, 1986: 429)

When asked about their understanding of the relationship between the formative feedback they were receiving and the learning outcomes and assessment criteria for the module, some students expressed uncertainty.

I think it's usually about the process of design, but it's nothing to do with, yes you developed that skill, or yes you didn't, or maybe you did it but not completely. There is nothing, no connection with that to be honest.

A more cynical view that was expressed by one student stated

Learning outcomes now are pretty much all the time are the same. There's one sentence, 'We want you to develop the skill of designing blah blah blah.' That's it. So I don't know how it links with the feedback.

The dilemma revealed by this apparent detachment of the students from the formalized and bureaucratic aspects of their learning experience, was captured by the comment of this student;

I think one of the most common complaints I've heard, just generally on the course I was on last year was, 'Oh this lecturer wanted me to do this but then this tutor told me to do exactly the opposite...' I mean, I think it's inevitable within an art course that obviously it's going to come down to personal taste, but I don't really know what you can do...

Quality of feedback

Although there were dismissive comments about the feedback they received within their programmes this did not mean that students do not value the comments of their tutors.

Especially because the point of formative feedback is so that it's something that you can build on, that it can help you move towards producing a better result, whereas if your feedback hasn't been constructive, like for example last week, when we were having tutorials, loads of people were just being told to rearrange their research, whereas they weren't told why or why they were rearranging...

Another student was very clear about what they wanted from feedback.

I don't mind if say a tutor spent five minutes with me and twenty with someone else, I don't really care how long they spend as long as what they say to me is constructive.

Interestingly, students' perceptions of the values teachers place on formative feedback is illuminating and somewhat dismissive.

For them it's just a chat. But for us it's our only tutorial, once a week for this whole project, that's all we're getting. We're like hanging on to every word they're saying whilst they're just kind of, you know, say whatever.

However, it is evident that teachers do take feedback seriously and have challenges of their own, especially with the increase of numbers and decrease in contact time.

One of the problems is that the written feedback often requires some verbal feedback after that, and, although it's not always identified by the student straightaway, you realise that you needed to explain that in a slightly different way. You thought you'd explained it well, but actually there always needed to be a follow-up session.

Feedback as critique

Some teachers and students view feedback as not only providing constructive support but also see it as the opportunity for students to develop the critical skills within their professional discourse. This goes beyond the notion of connoisseur, or the ability to appreciate the characteristics and language of the discipline, to that of critical participant who seeks to articulate judgments through critical disclosure (Eisner 1976). As this teacher comments;

I think that's an important part because I think there is this notion of being critical. I think within a review type situation, like tutorial guidance, but obviously an assessment is much more critical, it's the work there and then, as it is, and I think that's probably a crucial thing for students to understand.

Percy (Percy 1996) argued a similar case,

By participating in discourse, students engage in a critical self-reflective action in which they seek to convince their audience and themselves of the validity of their position, and it is this activity which is central to their future success in the professional world of designing.

Equally, students not only value crits as the opportunity to become more involved in critical discourse they would also welcome the opportunity to learn how to do it;

I think it would help you as well to learn how to crit, because I think that's a really good thing to have.

Time and Timing

Two key features which were identified in the study by both students and teachers as important were

- the need for appropriate time to conduct the feedback and
- the appropriate timing of feedback.

Although some students commented on there being insufficient time for the feedback to be meaningful, other students observed that there are instances when too much time is spent on the crit sessions,

But it's also those crits where they go through every piece of work and for the first hour or so it's good; people are contributing. But by the end of the day, it's unfair on those people who haven't had their work seen because everyone else is tired so they're not going to be as responsive to your work.

Students also highlighted that, although feedback from their tutors was provided, often it came too late for them to act upon it.

We did four-weekly rotations, so we'd hand in every four weeks but we'd never get our marks every four weeks. We would hand in and then start a project the next week, but you wouldn't get your mark back until four weeks later

Feedback structures

Inevitably, given the increase in class sizes over the past decade, strategies have been adopted to overcome the challenges of offering the same provision with less staffing. Self- and peer assessment techniques have been adopted, some willingly in the belief that encouraging students to participate in judgment making with their colleagues provides higher quality learning outcomes, some reluctantly as coping strategies to deal with the overwhelming numbers of students.

In many instances, students saw the benefits of collaborating with their peers;

In our groups there were about 7 or 8 of us. And then collectively we all decided on our own marking criteria, so some groups had marking for, I don't know, how much work they did or, if they turned up in a group meetings and things like that. So we all decided in our groups what we were going to set as our criteria so that we all understood...We had the assessment meetings every week with the tutor, so we could sort out, you know, just so it would help us understand where we were going with it and we did practices as well so that we could know where we were going with it.

...for example, we'll have a group tutorial between one tutor and, let's say twelve of us, that's so much more helpful than sometimes just having one just with the tutor, because you'll get all these other people who will just think of something while they're there.

It is also evident that one-to-one encounters continue to happen and are still appreciated by students;

I like to be with people face to face, because then they can answer questions, but if you've got a tutor who you don't like, they don't understand your work, and if that's the case, it is a bit hard. But then we are given the opportunity to go to a drop-in with one of the tutors on a Monday, or something, and whenever you want you could arrange a tutorial with any of the other tutors.

I think it's good because you tend to get a better impression of what they actually feel about certain things, whereas if it's written you can't get that sort of impression.

Feedback and online support

Students although not resistant to using technology instead of face-to-face contact with their tutors have identified some shortcomings;

I think it's good for things like portfolios and pdfs, but when you want to just bring in one project it's a lot easier for you and the tutor if they see it live. Especially if it's like 3D and you've got supporting work, and bring research and things. It wouldn't really work to have it online.

Despite the institutional arrangements for on-line learning and support, teachers have developed alternative forms of virtual communication with students.

The head of our year used Facebook instead to communicate everything, and it was just so much clearer and everyone knew what was happening, like every day because you'd just join the group and you could email them back, whereas on StudentSpace it's really harder to sort

Conclusion

Our research question asked: how do the discipline areas of art and design ensure that students understand and learn from the formative feedback given in relation to project/module learning outcomes?

Our findings suggest that, whilst formative feedback is now a common feature of the student learning experience in art and design, there is still much that can be further developed to ensure that student learning is maximized.

In particular, students need to know that, whatever the terminology used;

- There are structures in place which are designed to provide on-going support for them in seeking to achieve the outcomes of the project or module.
- Students should be able to articulate the purpose of the feedback and know when and where it happens.
- The timeliness of feedback is seen to be crucial to its successful contribution to student learning and, therefore, forward planning.
- A timetable of events, should be provided for students and staff.

All teachers particularly sessional teachers, should;

- Be inducted into the discipline's approach to formative feedback.
- Focus should be towards the helpfulness of feedback
- Feedback should be designed to enable students to become critically aware and able to articulate their work within a professional context.
- Students welcome advice on how to proceed to meet the project objectives but the advice needs to be constructive and achievable.
- Students also welcome the comments of their peers. Their comments suggested that it is difficult for them to criticise the work of their colleagues in an open crit forum so strategies should be adopted to help students to comment in a critical and structured way that also promotes critical discourse. Online forums are one example of how this has worked.
- Students benefit from on-line support but also welcome individual, face-to-face discussion of their work. Whilst this might take place in smaller groups, the potential for 'the personal touch' should not be underestimated or lost.

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Short Biography

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