

By design: engaging Graphic Communication students in curriculum development (a video case study)

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Introduction

Graphic Communication students face the challenge of acquiring a range of technical skills in addition to their creative, historical, professional and theoretical learning within a design degree. The range of software they are required to learn, in order to design across multiple genres and platforms in today's rapidly-evolving media industry, is also increasing. Design students are often reported to be inclined to focus on developing their technical skills rather than the "*critical thinking and reflective learning*" skills that their tutors focus on (Park and Kastanis, 2009, p. 12). Similarly, within our BA Graphic Communication programme based in the Department of Typography & Graphic Communication at the University of Reading, student feedback highlights that students would like more support for developing their technical learning. We have been working with our students to respond to this issue in various ways. One of our initiatives has been to introduce a new optional module that supports first-year students' technical learning. The case study presented in this video submission highlights how Graphic Communication students from different year groups worked with staff to develop the new module.

Organisational and historical context

The inspiration for the partnership approach to curriculum design, featured here, came from the Department's successful engagement in the University's flagship scheme to promote student-staff collaborations in teaching and learning: PLaNT – Partnerships in Learning and Teaching (Loveland *et al.*, 2016). The principles underlying PLaNT – to value and bolster the creative contributions of students in shaping their own educational experiences – were refreshing and permitted us to engage students further by such means. As Healey *et al.* (2014) describe, student engagement is a *process*, rather than an end-product. PLaNT gave a status and profile to this process of "*staff and students learning and working together to foster ... engaging learning and teaching enhancement*" (p. 7) and we have consequently been encouraged to embed opportunities for partnership in the ways we respond to students' module evaluations and to the broader processes of curriculum review and development.

The scheme has gradually brought about change in how the student-staff relationship is perceived at the University, both among the staff and student body. Our growing confidence in capitalising on this within the Department has led to more informal, authentic opportunities to pursue partnership work, one of which is captured in this case study.

Methods used

As part of the module development process presented in this case study, students from different year groups were invited to participate in a focus group to share their ideas about what a new module needed to cover and what forms of assessment they thought would be appropriate. Their ideas were then either adopted and built in, from the outset, to the new module development or applied, as relevant, to other modules within the curriculum.

<https://youtu.be/z8teWIo9rpU>



By Design captions.sbv

Evaluation and lessons learnt

The focus group provided an invaluable source of information for both the new module and other modules within the degree. In particular, it led us to re-design the module content, putting more emphasis on basic technical skills ahead of introducing students to the more specialised skills we had envisaged the module would encompass. We also highlighted the development of transferable skills through the inclusion of time management and personal development activities. These tasks helped students develop a personalised learning plan so that their choice of technical learning activities could be mapped to their career goals and self-identified learning needs. Learning activities were supported by video resources and included incremental reflection. Without the student focus group views, we would have been unlikely to:

- embed, explicitly, time management and personal development activities into the module;
- move away from an end-of-module blog or reflection report in favour of incremental reflection activities.

The Department Director of Teaching and Learning noted:

“The information gathered from the student focus groups was incredibly valuable, both in terms of our thinking about the module in general (what it should cover, how it should be structured and assessed) and in developing specific briefs within the module (skills that students wanted to develop, how they learn, and how they would like to be assessed). The final shape of the module and the individual briefs was defined by staff discussions, but these were heavily influenced by the focus groups, and incorporated student views that we would not have had otherwise.”

The focus group also provided helpful guidance to those early-career colleagues involved in developing learning resources and assessment tasks for the module. A teaching assistant involved in developing particular learning activities for this module said:

“When designing a module for the first time the student feedback helps you to concentrate on very specific tasks. As an early career educator the feedback provides valuable experiential knowledge that enhances the development of your teaching skills.”

The focus group views have also been useful in helping us:

- re-work how technical learning is mapped to practical projects in the second-year curriculum;

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- re-design learning resources and assessment within a Professional Practice module.

Beyond our specific departmental context, this case study is being used to encourage colleagues across different disciplines to embed student engagement initiatives into the process of curriculum design. The approach was received particularly positively at a recent teaching and learning development session for its emphasis on offering sufficient boundaries to allow students and staff to feel 'safe' in what can be a relatively unfamiliar process, while allowing the freedom of discussion to enable meaningful change.

Bovill *et al.* (2011) have argued for the pedagogic importance of students as co-creators in curriculum development. In addition to improving the quality and relevance of changes to curriculum design, student engagement can also enhance staff and students' "*sense of relationship*" (Bovill *et al.*, 2011, p. 6). To add to this argument, we suggest that, within design education specifically, engaging students as co-creators is particularly important. Design education often relies on studio learning activities like group critiques of practical design work ('crits') to help students acquire and apply tacit knowledge to their own and their peers' work (Logan 2006). Without a culture of co-creation and respect, studio learning activities may set up a learning environment that still echoes the more traditional relationship between the 'master' craftsman and her/his apprentices from which much art and design education evolved (Logan, 2006; Ellmers, 2014). Design educators should also consider how the emphasis on studio teaching and small-group 'crits' may provide tutors with a stronger impression of student engagement than students themselves experience.

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The University of Reading Research Ethics Committee (School of Arts and Communication Design) has reviewed this pedagogic study.

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