

Mind the Gap: An evaluation of Joint Development Practice between FE and HE tutors within Art and Design

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Abstract

The aim of this research project was to evaluate how well Access tutors could work together with HE staff to improve pedagogy with a specialist art and design college. This case study illustrated the benefits and challenges of working with other sectors in art and design education. Access tutors observed HE sessions where students presented work and received feedback in the studio (studio critiques). A group of Access students also observed a HE critique take place. Through discussion and critical reflection, strategies for improving Access delivery were identified based on a Joint Practice Development approach. The strengths and weaknesses of this approach formed part of the evaluation.

Introduction:

The Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS), a sector-owned body which aims to develop excellent and sustainable FE provision, awarded the college a grant that enabled a range of cross-sector activities to occur, with the aim that this would help improve the experience of Access students when they progressed from FE to HE. Previous research had indicated that this could be done by building resilience and confidence in students in order to prepare them to cope with the demands of HE. It was found that although Access students performed well at HE they were vulnerable to dropping out, (Broadhead and Garland, 2012). The reasons for this appeared to concern age and cultural differences between ex-Access students and the rest of the HE cohort; confidence about the critical rigor of the students own work and participation in critiques and assessments. In order to continue and develop this line of research it was decided to explore and to improve the Access delivery of studio critiques, as this would improve student confidence and critical rigor. During recent years the HE provision at the college had been expanded, at the same time the delivery of FE and HE courses had been polarised onto two separate sites, so as well as wanting to improve critical thinking and critical rigor it was also thought to be a good idea to initiate a dialogue with HE tutors to improve the pedagogical experience of transition. This formed the reason for undertaking activities such as Access staff observing a variety of studio critiques that occurred in art and design HE programmes. In particular the practices of BA Art and Design Interdisciplinary, BA Fine Art and BA Printed Textiles and Surface Pattern were observed and discussed. In February 2011 the QAA identified the use of structured group critiques for studio work as a feature of good practice within the college's HE provision, (QAA, Institutional Reports, 2011). The critique can be seen as a dynamic

process where student work is selected, discussed and evaluated. Often the studio critique can be seen as an end in its own right, however, they should, 'favour process over product, the means over the end, and arguably a belief in a necessary fluidity between the artist the creative act and the possibilities of a final product,'(Buster and Crawford, 2007, p ix). This is an area where shared understandings between FE and HE staff about the nature of the critique would be beneficial to students. Access students were also able to talk to HE students about their work. This was very valuable to the Access to HE course, both staff and students because previously a research project had recommended a dialogue with HE tutors to ensure the Access to HE course kept up to date with changes in HE, (Broadhead and Garland, 2011). It had also pointed out that critical rigour was seen by students as an area that could be developed on the Access course, so concentrating on the studio critique would be a means of exploring this issue more in depth. This would help the course best prepare Access students for HE study as well as ensure they applied to the best course for them.

Context

The college has two main campuses. It runs a range of specialist and general Art and Design FE Courses at one site that is mostly self-contained and separate from the other site where a range of specialist degree and foundation degrees are taught. The majority of tutors work mainly on one site, perhaps meeting all together a couple of times a year during staff development weeks or briefing days.

The college delivers the Access to HE Diploma (art and design) as a full time day course and in a part-time mode on an evening. It is aimed at mature students who have not been in conventional education for at least a year. What constitutes a mature student has become increasingly vague, students can be as young as nineteen, but may find the pace of an Access course more suitable to their needs than a Pre-BA Foundation course or A levels, which are seen as the more traditional route to degrees in art and design (Hudson, 2009, p.25). However, there is usually a wide range of students from ages ranging from twenty to over seventy. Often these students have had a diverse set of experiences and come from a variety of backgrounds. The aim of the Access to HE Diploma is to prepare students for a degree or foundation degree in art and design. Not only is this done by accreditation at level three but also by the preparation of a portfolio of work which is used at interviews as part of the application process.

The students are taught the knowledge and skills necessary to succeed on their higher level course; these skills include visual studies, drawing, responding to set and self-directed briefs, technical skills in specialist workshops like photography, ceramics or printmaking, contextual studies, academic skills of researching, presenting and essay writing.

The full-time and part-time Access provision is successful in getting people onto the higher education course of their choice. Progression is not just restricted to local Higher Education Institutions and universities, but includes many types of art and design courses all over the country (*Further education: Student Achievements and Career Routes*, 2009-2010, p28-33). About ten to eighteen students a year progress internally. Students who are successful in achieving a place generally take up that place up in the following September.

The underpinning theoretical context

The main theoretical framework for this study was based on Joint Practice Development (JPD), a concept that critiques the cascade model of staff development. It argues that good practice cannot be easily passed on from one group of practitioners to another for two main reasons. Firstly cascading good practice can be seen to be divisive because it promotes the idea that one group of people has good practice and another does not thus creating an unequal and perhaps resentful working relationship, (Fielding et al, 2005). Secondly, the context in which practice is performed is not deeply considered; what is good practice in one area may not be suitable in another. It could be argued that all practices need to be modified to fit a new context. Rather than passing or cascading practices to colleagues a more sustainable process would be to develop relationships and trust between groups of professionals where ideas can be explored together over time, (Fielding et al, 2005). Other aspects that need consideration are; teacher and institutional identity in practice transfer; learner engagement; and an understanding of the time needed to successfully engage with JPD, (Fielding et al, 2005).

As the project developed it was seen that one key issue was the studio critique and how this was a form of formative assessment. This has been explored at primary and secondary levels by Shirley Clarke. The statement below would be what tutors would want to observe when a studio critique as a means of formative assessment is occurring.

“ The dominance of a constructive pupil dialogic talk in the classroom is a key identifier of a formative assessment culture in which pupils are actively involved in thinking; effective pupil talk paying a central role in the philosophy of citizenship, personalisation and life long learning.” (Clarke, 2008, p35)

Although the context in which the formative assessment was carried out was different from that of Clarke's paper it can be seen that this kind of practice would be central to good studio culture at FE and HE level as it promotes students that can reflect in a meaningful way on their own work and that of others. Dylan Williams has talked extensively about the role assessment has in the learning process:-

“Assessment for learning is any assessment for which the first priority in its design and practice is to serve the purpose of promoting pupils' learning. It thus differs from

assessment designed primarily to serve the purpose of accountability or ranking” (Dylan, 2009, p8)

This describes the nature of the studio critique where by critically reflecting on the work of students by students is intended to promote critical thinking that is not necessarily driven or led by the tutor or the tutors’ assessment agenda.

The values and identities of different groups of practitioners are also important concepts to consider when reflecting on cross-sector partnerships. An insight into other professionals’ positions within an institution brings to light differences in what is seen as important within the education process. This exposure to other points of view through observation and discussion will influence teacher identities through the stories and communications professionals tell each other. Expressions of cultural values, norms, and structures are also passed on through narratives in discussion:- (Rex, Murnen, Hobbs, & McEachen, 2002 in D. Beijaard et al., 2004, p123) The exchange of ideas with other art and design educators will lead to a deeper understanding of the issues students face when they progress from FE to HE with particular reference to the studio critique.

Method

The research was based on a case study approach. This was because there were a complex set of issues identified in previous research that needed analysis within a well-defined context, that of the art college. It examined what are for students and tutors everyday activities within the particular environment of the studio. Although there can be no generalisations made on the basis of the findings that could be reliably applied within a different context, it can make suggestions about what could be happening to this particular set of students at this particular time and in this particular institution. The idea of *trustworthiness* was seen as a more appropriate notion than validity or reliability as this was, for the most part, a qualitative study (Shenton, 2004, p 63). *Trustworthiness* was discussed in depth alongside ethical issues by Bassegy in relation to case study research (1999, p118). This was done by looking at the studio critique from a range of points of view (that of students, Access tutors and HE tutors) and recording the activities in detail.

The Access course leaders made an appeal for HE tutors who wanted to take part in cross-sector activities during a staff development presentation addressed to the whole college. From this call for partners, three HE courses expressed an interest: - BA Interdisciplinary Art and Design, Visual Communications, and Printed Textiles and Surface Pattern. In practice it was difficult to arrange activities within the research time frame with Visual Communications. Further links with the first year Fine Art were established and a meeting arranged with an Access tutor to discuss their studio critique practices which had been previously observed. A timetable of shadowing was then drawn up. Three Access tutors were selected to shadow and observe HE activities. Two of the research team were part-time and would usually

have had less opportunity to network with colleagues in HE than course leaders and full time tutors. This project enabled them to work together with HE staff to develop their own practice and feedback observations to the Access team. The Access tutors were responsible for arranging a time when they could shadow a HE studio critique session. They then made notes about what they had seen and discussed their findings with both their HE and FE colleagues.

Two examples were a cross- year studio critique and another one which focused on one piece of work. They were delivered by the BA (Hons) Art & Design Interdisciplinary Course that aimed to promote a 'sense of ownership'. This was managed by three HE tutors and observed by two Access tutors who made reflective notes that were then shared with the rest of the Access team.

The first studio critique was part of an 'Open Studio' week where all students from the three year groups arranged current work within their individual work spaces.

Students were split into 4 groups. Each group has mix of 1st, 2nd and 3rd years. All students prepared to present work, but tutors (unknown to the students) had selected in advance one person per year per group to actually present to the rest of the group.

The Access tutor observed staff discussions before studio critiques there was a strong focus on what questions to ask. There were similar questions for each student, but differentiation through the expectation of different qualities of answers depending on year group.

The style of studio critique varied throughout the academic year. This particular one was to build on an 'Open Studio' event and encourage communication between year groups. There was no formal feedback given, but students were encouraged to reflect on experience over the Christmas break. The staff were looking for evaluative comments on student's own practice that weren't initiated by staff. The presentations were not linked to a particular brief but were concerned with process, rules of practice, tools of practice and links to other practitioners. It was noted that there were very strong links to critical studies.

During the studio critiques students were reminded about weekly 'discussion forum' that would start in the new term. Students were encouraged to put questions/themes onto the notice board, which would be the basis of a vote on the most popular topic to start off the next term's work.

The Access tutor described how the group moved around studio to different workspaces. All students were engaged with standing and looking at work, maybe this was less intimidating for the student leading the studio critique? Most students

were very quiet during process and interestingly, most questions and comments came from past Access students.

During the studio critiques students presented and talked about just a few key pieces. Several times the HE tutors encouraged students to stop and reflect on work so far. Staff were keen for students to develop an idea more deeply rather than explore lots of ideas more superficially.

The second structured studio critique was introduced by an HE tutor who presented a group of first year students with a mystery object. The group was asked to identify what it was and who made it. Two students were able to deduce that the object was a coat hanger designed by Antony Gormley, this initiated a discussion about the relationship between art and design. The Access tutor noted that this was a way of the HE tutor contributing something to the session and engaging the interest of the group. Students were then asked to select one piece of work and to think carefully how to present it. Within groups of about 6 students the work was discussed by everyone, but the creator of the work. Only at the end of the process did the student say what intentions were behind the work. The Access tutor thought that the process led to focused discussions that were not bogged down in superficial detail. The HE course leader and the Access tutor had the opportunity to share the observations after the session.

A group of students from the Access course also observed the studio critique. They had opportunities to talk to HE students about what it was like on the HE course. Access students found this helped decide whether or not they were ready to go onto higher education and if this was the right course for them. HE students later brought their portfolios into the Access studio which was also well received by the Access group.

After this process the Access team discussed how some of the ideas learned from the shadowing exercise could be applied to the curriculum. These ideas needed to be considered within the context of Access provision, as not everything successfully done on an HE course would be appropriate at level 3. These included the following suggestions:

- Non-brief specific studio critique:- Access tutors had previously linked studio critiques and formative assessment to briefs, rather than seeing them as part of assessment for learning (Dylan, 2009, p8). However by making a studio critique more about a student's own working methods than the physical outcomes could encourage students to reflect on their own practice. This would help them in preparing UCAS applications, interviews, and writing own their briefs. Students would become more aware of who they are as artists/designers/craftspeople.

- Consideration of the timing of studio critiques by timetabling them before breaks when students could be given reflective questions raised from the studio discussions to work on in sketchbook during the holidays.
- Students owning studio critique space: -previously, students had brought work to a separate space. But by letting students present in their own spaces it could be more balanced and equal. It would save time, and students could take time to go round and look at each other's work.
- Developing a discussion forum:- it would be difficult to allocate an hour a week for an in-depth discussion, but it would be a positive use of Moodle (the college's virtual learning environment) and maybe a way of uniting 1st and 2nd year Access students. If this engaged students it could become almost self-running.
- Introduce more cross-year studio critiques to boost the confidence of second year students who would be talking about their work in interviews.
- The danger of focusing on one student at a time was identified in the staff guide of *Critiquing the Crit*, (Orr, S, Blythman, M., Blair, M., 2008, p8). Access tutors could, therefore, structure studio critiques so that the student's peers
- comment on the work before the student talks about it. This would mean that everyone has to be engaged with the process, rather than just the student who is presenting the work.
- Selection and presentation of work is a really important part of the HE critique, this was different in FE practice where 'work in progress' was generally viewed. This fits in with Buster and Crawford, (2007, p ix) where they stress the selection of work by students. This means that the students are being more independent in making critical evaluations about their work.

Conclusions

The process worked best when there was already a good relationship between the two courses, through previous contact and good communication about student transition from FE to HE. The amount of time for developing such a relationship cannot be underestimated. Fielding et al. (2005, p35) discuss how an understanding of the time is needed for in depth collaborative professional learning to take place. Both parties should be committed to the project and value the outcomes. Although the outcomes of the JPD process are owned by the course teams because of the time and personal investment made by the participants, it would not normally have

occurred without external funding, as it opened up new spaces for relationship building and trust. It may be difficult to sustain this level of cross-sector collaboration.

The Access tutors appreciated the shift of focus in the studio critique from the object/image/work to the creative process. The use of different years in the studio critique was also interesting as a way of boosting confidence when talking in front of people different from peers. The ideas gleaned from the shadowing experiences were useful because Access staff could imagine how they could be used within their own particular practice. The role of imagination as part of participation within a professional community is discussed by Etienne Wenger (1999, p217) where he says imagination allows us to adopt perspectives across boundaries and time. If tutors could not imagine how new practice would fit within their particular context then it is unlikely they would be motivated to try out new possibilities.

This is an important point to make as it is what differentiates JPD process from the cascade model of improvement and pedagogical development. Practices are selected and edited to best fit a particular situation rather than adopted in an uncritical way.

The course partnership that was very successful was with the Art and Design Interdisciplinary course because the FE and HE staff some common ground. The Access course had been successful over previous years in sending students to this degree programme who had flourished on it. This was similar to the point,

“Long-term, prior, relationships were seen by many participants to be enabling. Many examples arose where practice transfer was seen to have been successful because it drew on existing relationships...” (Fielding et al, 2005, p8)

For example the art and design degree had more open briefs and were wide ranging, rather than courses like Photography or Interior design, for example, which are more focused and specialist.

The shift in focus away from the products the students produced to the processes demonstrated a difference of values between FE and HE staff. Access staff valued the production of a portfolio of artefacts that would allow entry to a degree course. When doing studio critiques Access staff had focused on how well the work produced had met the brief. However, the HE staff are more interested in helping students become confident reflective practitioners who can work professionally after their course. This meant that the studio critique was not necessarily tied to the criteria stated in the brief but could be about the students creative methodologies that were employed and how successful the process had been. This difference is not a bad thing but is useful to consider when Access students progress onto their HE course. There could be ways in which both objects and processes could be considered in an Access critique so encouraging critical self-reflection in the students and thus preparing them for HE.

The students from Access also observed studio critiques in HE although his only occurred once it did help students feel more confident imagining themselves on an HE course in the future.

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