

PROGRESSIVE APPROACH TO ASSESSMENT PRACTISES WITHIN DESIGN

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, there has been an increasing amount of literature disseminated on assessment. The relationship between curricula content and assessment criteria, both delivered by the academic is that which the student must understand. Assessment is considered by the authors to be a fundamental mechanism of measuring ability. Assessment needs to be understood and valued by both the lecturer and the students for progression to take place. During a period of study, undergraduate students are expected to develop, mature and embody professionalism. One question that needs to be asked however, is whether the students understand and contribute to an assessment criteria that will govern their progress? The discipline of critical theory is perceived as essential to the education of the designers by the authors; this area was chosen to be re-designed for the purpose of creating greater clarity for students, by designing an assessment matrix and a number of instruments of assessment for staff to use. This ensured that the process was of real value to the undergraduate body. For this study, students at Nottingham Trent University attending the Furniture & Product Design programmes were assessed using an instrument of assessment; generic in design, but content specific to a module constructed within the design of an overall assessment matrix. The authors suggest that the design of a matrix system linked to learning outcomes and instruments of assessment is democratic for students and academics; therefore fairer in correlating enthusiasm and understanding.

Keywords: Clarity, feedback, case study, best practise

1 INTRODUCTION

There has always been a diverse range of opinions concerning the methods of assessment in pedagogic circles. Assessment can be a form of measurement with which we measure learning. Assessment can be competence based; but it can also be used to gauge or calculate abstractions, such as ideas, creativity and originality. It is claimed by Smith, et al, [1] that assessment should be considered alongside; course team strategies, learning through assessment and methods of assessment. However, the constructive alignment theory of Biggs [2], suggests that: "The 'best' assessment method is the one that best realizes your objectives". It can be all too easy for assessment practices to be considered as repetitive tasks, and that students need to complete these satisfactorily until they achieve the desired outcome set by the academic staff. Within design, Liddell, et al, [3] identifies a clearly recognised principle that consistent attitudes, thoughts and beliefs as cognitive dissonance relates to processes of repetition until a specific outcome is achieved.

However, the approach outlined in this paper, presents a differing view of assessment which is more student-centred methodology; one which is still about achieving the results, but also considering progression of the individual's development and progression through the years of study. The outline will show how students can develop from initial introductions to university through to final critical academic work, such as the dissertation. Therefore, this paper is looking not to add to this debate on defining assessment as a principle, but to argue that assessment should be considered as part of constructive alignment within the learning process, whereby assessment offers a means of progression of the learning experience and provides the opportunity for students to individually develop, as at this moment there is some degree of confusion. As recent as 2006, Thacara [4] expressed his exasperation at the number of official bodies within the UK who have a formal role in the development in education, 'no fewer than 270 different entities were in a position to send directives to English schools'. It would seem to suggest that there is a need for consistency; a possible area for development

could be cognitive dissonance which 'is a tendency to seek consistency among attitudes, thoughts and beliefs'. [5]

2 CONSTRUCTION

To do this, the initial discussion will present an overall view of the assessment practises within the Critical Theory modules. This subject area was chosen as it was substantially present across all Furniture & Product Design courses; two were arts-based and two rooted in the sciences, at Nottingham Trent University. In addition, whilst it was a core subject within each programme; students did not directly chose this subject when making their course choices to enter university; all courses were design-led. The framework for this paper is initiated by outlining the overall assessment matrix which considers specific assessment practices and highlights how each area can tie into each other in a linear process. Additionally, results will be presented an overall view of assessment practices and their relationships to the years of study over the courses to determine an understanding of assessment practices and how these interrelated with the student experience. These constructs will present an initial overview and understanding of the assessment process. Later discussions outline how these practices constituted to the students' experience of Critical Theory. Using descriptions of the assessment process, alongside student feedback, findings highlight how these correlated alongside the progression of the learning process and whether this provides opportunities for feeding into the follow year.

Ultimately, this paper is not suggesting these assessment practices are successful in improving students' achievements directly, as there are many more factors than simply the assessment process that can influences this, beyond even the university forum, as stated by Prosser & Trigwell [6]. More so this research explored with the purpose to identify and understand a specific assessment approach in terms of whether it offered any opportunities to develop their students' awareness of the subject area. All of the assessments require students to be applying constructive criticism to their work and use academic conventions; such as evidencing their ideas to others, as standard practise.

As can be seen, the key areas that the research characterised related to the different emphasis on learning at levels one: introductory and led by staff in year one; diagnostic alongside analysis led partly by staff and students in level two and critical application led by students but supported by staff in the final year. Assessment practices show progress from one to another and result in the final achieve outcome of completing the year. Each assessment builds upon the previous assessment, looking to build on the skills or areas to encourage development further. In taking and understanding this progressive approach to assessment, it is hoped to go beyond the premise of measurement of learning, and provide a more transparent and holistic practice of developing students' learning and experiences.

3 ASSESSMENT PROCESS AT LEVEL 1: INTRODUCTION ('LEADING' THE STUDENTS)

At level 1 it is important to maintain an overview of the student needs. Maslow's, hierarchy of needs still has some validity. It continues to be taught in many business schools; the physiological needs are followed by safety needs, beingness, esteem and self actualisation as stated by Cardwell, [7]. The students in level 1 emanate from different backgrounds, possess diverse qualifications, possibly a range of cultures, have expectations concerning their higher educational experience, and want their aspirations to be met. Given the range of variables it would seem sensible to try and 'de-school' the students and establish a platform to build upon which reflect some degree of educational and experiential equality. Within the new university context, students needed direction and support, so these courses have be design overall to consider the first year to be introductory. Previous pedagogic research has shown that university and educational practices need to be introduced as well as subject-specific elements. Thus, assessment practices needed to be designed to be gradual; whereby students initiated a project and assessment elements were gradually revealed in the early stages. An example of this was the Debates assessment, were introduced to students by forming discussion groups where staff encouraged critical, and sometimes heated, debate on any design topics students could think of. From this Students produced key topics that they felt passionately about in design, and had to defend and justify these in the subsequent session. At this stage, students had experience and expectations to draw from, so this assessment could be clearly introduced; here as a group-based traditional debate. To

provide so ownerships for the students, staff used students' initial topics to produce a more concise list of debating topics as part of the assessment.



Assessment Practices; specific and overall
Figure 1. Overview of each year and the progression between these years:

This approach did not rush into the assessment at the beginning of the designated time, but took a more gradual introductory format that provided benefits for staff and students. For staff, this gradual process provided a means of reference; to show students not only what they were looking for, but also exemplifying these skills and knowledge that may have been present over the previous debating sessions. For students, the gradual process provided a means of understanding what was expected and what the assessment entails, from not only what they staff said, but drawing from their experiences in previous sessions.

Throughout the year, students are led and encouraged to consider their individual development as a working designer, understanding the importance or critiquing their work to support their maturity. Specific assessments did encourage this, not just in offering some reflection at the end point, but more built into the premise of the assessment itself. The research project assessment was constructed as a feeder into level 2 issues and emphasises; by asking students to question and construct a critical profile of a chosen peer. Whilst making use of their design skills, student produced a magazine article visually emulating an existing and current magazine format; such as Wallpaper, Blueprint or Design Week. This reflective review offered students the means to understand skills, strengths and weaknesses, abilities and future ambitions in terms of personal development of others as well as themselves. Staff used this as a vehicle to introduce questions; such as why do you design, what do you want to achieve, what have you learnt from over this year, all of which fed into concepts for year two.

Feedback results from the students at the end of the year; outlined that students had commonly grown in confidence in completing certain tasks:

“I have become progressively surer by talking to people, conducting research and discussing my findings, which has increased my confidence.”

“I feel more confident about my writing skills and I have a lot more knowledge about academic theory.”

Improved confidence in airing views and communicating: As may be expected with this form of assignment, students commonly (25%) commented on this project aiding their communication skills, discussing how this work aided their confidence to air ideas.

“I have developed my communication skill; I now feel it easier to talk to new people and express my views in large groups, which I struggled to do before.” Level 1 Furniture and Product Design Student

Students raised several different means where the debates sessions enhanced their confidence. The final presentation in the debates forum spurred many to feel confident about communicating to large audiences. However, others discussed aspects in prior weeks; such as conducting primary research, discussing ideas in the groups, which increased their confidence to communicate.

Improved understanding of key design issues

Almost all students (92%) continued to debate their subject matter within their reflections; even through they were directly asked not to discuss the subject matter. However other students directly discussed how the debates session, improved their understanding of key design issues.

“I can’t say that I have learnt all things about drawing through this project. However I found out about issues, which I never tried to think about before – to perceive what drawing is to a designer, and I will try to find out more and be aware of this more in future.” Level 1 BA Product Design Student

Some students also showed how they had developed a greater relationship with staff during this process, in that they had appropriate support and guidance:

“I wanted to thank the staff for their support throughout the course, they have changed the way I see design and the design world for the better”.

Assessment overall at this level appeared to be core in focusing these early students on a task to learn as well as achieve results. However assessment outcomes within this level were designed to include a considerable amount of reflection as well as outline critical debate, discussion and analysis.

4 ASSESSMENT PROCESS AT LEVEL 2: DEVELOPMENT (WORKING WITH THE STUDENTS)

At the start of level 2 the teaching process continues with return inductions, reminiscent to level 1 but on a less degree. Assessments process do not need to be introduced in detail at this stage, as students will have had experience of these previously, but may need a reminder and in context to the level of study they are now at. Level two is characterised by the partnership between the students and staff, whereby students begin to take the lead in a more analytical and discursive framework.

Students are given 3 key projects; the Sales Pitch, a Critical Essay and a visual Essay or a Digital Journal. These follow on and compliment each other in a progressive manner, as well as building on level 1:

1. The Sales Pitch asks students to characterise themselves in a way which articulates their strengths and weaknesses, following the research project previously.
2. The Critical Essay, asks students to develop their ideas from the sales pitch to critically question why do you design?
3. The Digital Journal culminates the earlier pieces of work into a journalistic format, whereby students are asked to detail a specific issue they are interested in and how this relates to their ideas and the design industry currently and historically.

It is important that the students begin to understand that there is a difference between being at a university and the ‘real’ world of work; this is exemplified in the following statements by McCormack, [8] ‘Don’t be a wanker embrace what it means to be a professional designer’. Making the transition from design student to successful creative designer often involves a lot of re-assessment according to Foster, H. [9] and ‘design is all about desire, but today the desire seems almost subject less, or at least almost lack-less, design seems to advance a kind of narcissism that is all image.’

Student feedback at this level identified that understanding and progression could be achieved alongside an interest and engagement in the subject area:

“I have a better understanding to approaching a new task. Working with critical theory, my work has developed in more depth”. “Over the course of the past year, I have become more interested in aspects of design and started to learn more specific opinions about what actually interests me”

Overall the students demonstrated a confidence in the briefs that are set, and took a more assertive and independent approach. They easily expressed valid and evidenced opinions which presented staff with a more confident and mature outcome, as well as satisfying the level objective for this year of study.

5 ASSESSMENT PROCESS AT LEVEL 3: CONFIRMATION (STUDENT-LED, STAFF SUPPORTING)

In the final year the students from the BA & BSc programmes separate; the former producing a theses and the latter a dissertation. For the purposes of this analysis, the BA stream will be considered as this is where the major crucial theory ideals present in detail. Much of the feedback from students was taken during initial introductory stages, and towards the end of the module. Coupled with these 'fears', staff determined that many students at this level appeared centred on achieving a high classification and would, at times, strategically consider assessments in those terms. From these initial considerations, staff determined that assessment practices needed to address this culture and maintain the overall emphasis of the year. The approach to being realistic about design is emphasised by Julier who states [10], 'We have seen the practice of design under continued revision, so the definition of design is constantly and self consciously being constructed, but also decentred dispersed and disorganised'. Throughout this research the approach the authors have taken is based upon common sense and realism as espoused by Warburton [11].

6 CONCLUSION

This research has used the critical theory subject area as a common variable to focus on assessment practices across the various design related courses. However, this research was limited in its localisation to Product design disciplines. Whilst this is the case, there has always been a strong relationship between various design-related areas; therefore, the authors suggest that these findings contribute to the established canon of design education. The journey that the students experience reflects a process of naivety through to maturity and this paper suggests assessment practices and process should follow suit as a fluid maturing process. They understand there are connections between theory and practise. This research has outlined an alternative approach to assessment, which considers assessment less singularly and more in context to the level of study and the progressive nature of learning at university.

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