

RETHINKING DIGITAL ARTS PEDAGOGY IN HIGHER EDUCATION: ASSESSING THE PROCESS OF CREATION

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Abstract

It is recognised that assessing creative outputs is often viewed as a subjective practice, and although skills-based assessment is more objective, it can easily devalue creative education to simply training. In order to be successful in the creative industries, particularly digital arts, graduates need to demonstrate that they are able to express creatively and can provide innovative solutions to problems. Whilst knowledge in industry-standard applications is required, this alone is not sufficient to succeed in a creative career. Creative courses often include elements of reflection and critical evaluation, however, the process leading to the end result is often overlooked.

This paper is concerned with the way in which focus on the process of creation and experimentation, rather than the final artefact, can be integrated into the curriculum. In particular, it discusses the pedagogical methodology that can be adopted within digital arts undergraduate project assessments to place emphasis on the process of product development, whilst providing a way to enhance the learning experience and aid professional skills development.

Keywords: digital arts, pedagogy, higher education, assessment.

1 INTRODUCTION

The creative industries are currently the fastest growing sector of the UK economy, contributing over £101 billion in Gross Value Added in 2017, an increase of over 53% since 2010 [1]. In addition, the number of UK employment opportunities in the sector for 2017 was reported to be at just over 2 million [2]. To successfully meet the demands of the industry, pedagogical methodology in higher education for digital arts needs to ensure that students are appropriately equipped, and not simply skills trained in various software packages. Although assessment of skills-based processes can be more objective, it reduces creative education to training [3]. It is important to ensure graduates can express creatively, use their skills to provide creative and innovative solutions, and are able to critically reflect on their own practice [4, 5]. Therefore, in order to facilitate the creative process, appropriate assessment methods need to be devised.

1.1 Assessment

Art and design focused courses benefit from a blended approach of artefact creation alongside more traditional written and oral assessment methods; this helps to develop verbal fluency, and maintain distinction between theory, reflection, and practice [6]. However, in a 2007 review of 272 articles concerning innovative assessment, only 2% (n=6) were categorised as Art, Design and Media [7]; nevertheless, it is noted that there is a growing body of scholarly work in art and design pedagogy [4, 6, 8, 9]. Assessment tasks should be authentic to real-life situations [10]; where authentic assessment places emphasis on the “practical application of tasks in real-world settings” [11, p.154]. This can be achieved through the use of client briefs within assessment practice, which are either written by industry partners acting as clients or academics simulating a real-life situation [4, 6]. The use of client briefs within assessment “engages the student with functioning knowledge in its context” [10, p.223]. Furthermore, authentic assessment removes focus from purely developing technical skills, and exposes students to the experiences they may encounter in a creative career either in an agency or as a freelancer [4, 6].

1.1.1 Reflective Journals

One frequently used type of assessment are reflective journals. The adoption of reflective journals within programmes can be a useful tool in engaging students with the method of reflecting on their professional practice and decisions. However, it has been recommended that students only submit extracts of their journals, that focus on key incidents, for assessment [10], leaving the bulk of the journal as a personal

record of learning experience. For creative programmes, such an approach could result in a fairly vague understanding of the process which led to the final outcome. However, it is important to gain a comprehensive appreciation of the complexity of the process and the consequences as a result of development decisions [4]. Therefore, adding focus to the development process and documenting this in a visible way provides an opportunity for the student to “return to or explore new avenues previously discarded” [6, p.93], whilst enabling the academic to see the creative process undertaken.

2 THE DIGITAL ARTS PROJECT

In the Spring of 2019, a new module called *Second Year Project* was introduced into the syllabus of the *Digital Arts and Multimedia Technology and Design* undergraduate programmes. The project is focused on independent learning whilst working as part of a project team under the guidance of a supervisor. Particularly, students work in teams on a substantial digital media project over a 19-week period, whilst gaining an understanding of professionalism, intellectual property rights, and data protection in relation to the creative industries. In addition, they acquire knowledge in how to respond to a client brief, including project planning and management. Importantly, this is a process-based project, where the experience of the process is prioritized over the success of the outcome [12].

Students self-assemble into small project teams of 3 or 4. This allows for the project to mimic a larger team dynamic within the creative industries. Teams are then provided with a list of academic created client briefs from which they can self-select. Through allowing teams to select a brief, and without being too prescriptive on the creative output that must be produced in terms of visual style or technologies used, students can take ownership of the project and focus on an area that has “personal meaning and value” [13, p.45]. Teams are then assigned to the project supervisor who set the initial project brief. It is the students’ responsibility to arrange regular team meetings with their supervisor, typically once every two weeks.

The project assessment comprises of a presentation, short report, advanced prototype, and a blog. Although the blog does not hold a separate mark, it constitutes a very important part of the assessment as it informs the mark of the overall project. The presentation is a formative assessment, which takes place approximately 6 weeks into the project. It is an opportunity for the project team to present their interpretation of the brief and project plan to two academics and a small group of peers. It acts as a review of work in progress and provides the team with formative feedback as they move on with the development of their project. It also allows students to see how other teams are progressing and gain peer-critique. The short report, completed at the end of the project, critically reflects on the decisions made and whether the brief has been answered. In addition, the report discusses project management, teamworking, and considerations for the future. The scope of the prototype is to be discussed and agreed upon between the project supervisor and the team based on the type of project being undertaken. For example, a web project may omit user and performance testing. Whilst the report focuses on the project output as a whole and how the students worked together as a project team, the blog focuses on documenting the creative process.

2.1 The Creative Process

The use of blogs within academic and professional practice can encourage creativity and critical reflection [14, 15] and have the ability to enhance student learning and engagement [15, 16]. Especially, it has been reported that students have found blogging within assessment practice to be “a creative process that engaged them in their studies” [16, p.11]. With a view to improving reflection, engagement, and idea generation, students are required to keep an individual blog, hosted on the School’s web server, in which they document and reflect upon their individual research, design thinking, experimentation and development of ideas, team meetings, mistakes made, and lessons learnt. The blog is not merely a place for personal reflection, but becomes a space for an active demonstration of knowledge [10]. Students are advised to not only describe what they have done, but to explain why they took a particular development approach and critically reflect upon their decisions. Furthermore, project supervisors can encourage creative risk-taking [17] through highlighting the importance of learning from mistakes in creative practice. As students are traditionally risk averse, it is critical for project supervisors to indicate that the examiners wish to see evidence of such practice in the blog, and how it has influenced creative direction. In addition, emphasis is placed on including evidence of experimentation, or works in progress, even if they were not to make it to the final prototype. This helps to illustrate students’ creative process alongside any risk taking and what learning resulted from it. The importance of documenting what options were considered, why one technique was adopted over another, the implications for design

and development, and how the approach responds effectively to the brief are highlighted throughout the project. This focus on documentation explains the *why* and *how* of learning, not just the *what*. Rather than just being presented with the creative solution, students are required to show how and why they arrived at it, similar to a mathematician showing their working out not just the result. Students are required to maintain regular entries, typically once a week.

3 ASSESSING THE PROCESS OF CREATION

When considering the assessment of a module, a common approach is for students to work on a project, and the final artefact is then assessed on its merits. Alongside the submission, a short reflective commentary or report is usually required. Whilst outcomes-based assessment allows for the degree of learning which has been achieved to be determined, creativity does not sit well within tightly defined learning outcomes [6]. Such assessment practice often overlooks the importance of the way in which the final result was arrived at. Elements including creative experimentation, and design thinking, are intrinsic to a career in digital arts and the wider creative industries. In the method outlined in this paper, particular focus is given to the individual blog component of the project assessment. How was the advanced prototype arrived at? What evidence of experimentation is present? For example, a student working on an interactive web-based project may have several entries where they experiment with, and evaluate, various web technologies. Some, or all, of these technologies may not have made it to the final prototype, but the student is able to reflect on and document their creative process, design decisions made and discarded, and reflect on advantages and disadvantages of the chosen approach. Instead of just being presented with a result, the blog brings into focus the steps which led to the final prototype. In addition, visual development with still or moving image, and links to experimental code trials can be easily included. In contrast to a written reflective journal, students can effortlessly edit and update their blog entries. Furthermore, the blog is available on any platform, and students are more likely to engage with digital technology over pen and paper. During this process the student is able to evaluate their own skills, adding focus to their development as a digital arts practitioner and their “awareness of own process” [4, p.264]. It is this documented journey which forms a critical part of the assessment process.

The advanced prototype is evaluated to ascertain how well it answers the client brief, and how well the different components developed by individual team members integrate to form a cohesive outcome. The blog is used to inform this assessment process, allowing for the identification of individual contribution within the wider context of the team project. The report on the other hand is assessed on how well the team reflects on the quality of the final prototype and the process from inception to completion. Self and peer evaluations, combined with team vivas, are employed to inform the marking of the project and report components. Students who engaged well with the project and provided a rich account of their creative process in their blogs received higher marks than those who engaged to a lesser degree. Consequently, it was possible for there to be differences in marks amongst team members. As the focus is placed on the process of creation, rather than the final artefact, learning outcomes and assessment criteria need careful consideration.

Due to the varied nature of project types it is not possible to be fully prescriptive with assessment criteria. Involving students in the assessment design process has been shown to improve the student experience [18]. However, this needs to be an on-going process of reflection and adjustment with each new cohort. Whilst not carried out as part of this project, such practice would help to alleviate uncertainty surrounding the way in which the blog informs the marking of the project. Alternatively, the blog could be assessed as a component in its own right, which has been adopted in other academic practice [15, 16]. It is important to consider that being too rigid with criteria will counter creativity as it will instead guide students along a set route [10]. Therefore, criteria should focus on the appropriateness of the blog given the context of the client brief being answered.

A successful blog will reinforce the context of working within a practical creative industries environment, where team-based working is commonplace. Successful learning can be evidenced through students being able to demonstrate an ability to communicate their ideas, document and critically reflect on their decisions and experimentation, and clearly guide the reader through their creative practice.

4 CONCLUSIONS

The need to prepare undergraduate students for the demands of the creative industries extends further than merely skills training. The inclusion of real-life project briefs can aid personal development and

reduce focus on skills training [4]. Importantly, placing greater emphasis on the creative process through the use of blogs can encourage experimentation and foster reflection on the why and how of learning. In particular, this paper seeks to illustrate the way in which the online reflective journal can be creatively reimagined as a record of experimentation, design thinking and investigation for a future creative practitioner. This method can enhance arts-based programmes through exposing students to real-world scenarios and offers a means by which to enhance employability [6]. In the context of the *Second Year Project*, this approach was adopted and student feedback was very positive. The addition of further formative peer-review critiques between the presentation and final submission would address concerns relating to a lack of formal contact in the latter part of the learning process, and ensure students are on target.

Students often feel under a lot of pressure to perform well in high weighting summative assessments, which are considered instrumental in achieving a good degree classification [19]. Our approach facilitates summative assessment in a step-by-step manner. With students only required to produce an advanced prototype, rather than a fully refined end product, there was a noticeable reduction in anxiety surrounding a major deadline compared to other assessments across the programmes. This may have been due to the final output only being classified as an advanced prototype rather than a fully polished project. Alternatively, it may have been influenced by the team nature of the work; acting as a peer support network compared to major individual projects. However, some uncertainty remained surrounding the blog informing the mark of the project. Therefore, it is recommended that students are actively involved in setting marking criteria so that they can take the ownership of their learning.

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