

## **FRAGILE V AGILE: 'Traditional' / 'Modern' Hybrid Approaches to 1st Year Teaching - Capturing Positive Outcomes in Co-Curricular Activities for First Year students**

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Are we too agile? It's an odd question in an age where agility is a prerequisite for creativity and a prelude to most conversations about the design process. As Barnett and Coate suggest 'There can be no blueprint for a successful curriculum: all manner of possibilities are open today' (2005 pg. 147). Craft and function play an equally important role in design education and in the constantly-evolving industry focused environment of a branding, design and innovation programme the task of acclimatizing first-year students from a wider variety of backgrounds and experience can appear at first to seem daunting: Where to begin?

Working from empirical evidence, in Messiah's case as BA Course Leader for Spatial Design and my experience of first-year lead lecturer on BA Design Management and Cultures (BADMC), with both having been witness to attempts to engage students in co-curricular activities including a BADMC studio project and the UAL excellent Academic Support department, we were keen to undertake action research that would assist students in developing what Messiah called 'core skills' and what I saw, largely, as development of creative attributes.

Opting for a cyclical process of action research (Denscombe, 1998) whereby we undertook professional practice, critical reflection, research, strategic planning, then action to instigate change, we embarked on a series of voluntary co-curricular still-life drawing sessions for an eight-week period in the Spring term of 2018.

Our research stemmed from a provocation from Messiah to me the Fall term of 2017. Messiah's provocation was thus:

"For me the worry is during my many years in both Further Education (16yrs – 19 yrs. in UK.) and Higher Education (18yrs+ in the UK), I have seen the polarization in how the studio 'pans out' in terms of how it quickly becomes evident and apparent that there is a gulf in class between those who have had the opportunity to work with the core skills through the Further Education Foundation programme and those (again more often but not exclusively from poorer backgrounds) who have not. I for one recognize, each and every one of the students I have taught over the years, will have come with different skills, with different talents, approaches to the subject and aptitudes, so why do we force students into a form of social hierarchy in which it appears core skills are looked down upon and we are urged to push them onto a keyboard?" (Messiah, 2018).

The provocation from Messiah led to many interesting debates between us, which were followed up with other departmental staff and participating students from BADMC year one at University of the Arts London (UAL) at the London College of Communication (LCC). And although Messiah was alluding to our increasing reliance on technology in his provocation to act as the tool for all that we do, often meaning that traditional core skills, in particular, drawing, are no-longer used as a basic starting point, this paper is not a critique nor criticism of a perceived failings of students or staff to develop these skills.

Although the BADMC course prides itself as having a core activity curriculum unit 'Projects & Practices' which is a craft and function unit of 'hands on' studio design, and arguably a 'backbone' to the course. However, BADMC is largely seen as part of the new-wave IDEO inspired 'design thinking' (Tim Brown, 2009) school, we cover a wide range of topics from leadership and entrepreneurs to marketing and human-centered design. Anecdotally, the term 'management' is often still met with raised eyebrows when co-joined with design in some circles outside of UAL, we are fortunate to be working under a Dean of Design School that instigated the BADMC course.

From the outset, one of the most exciting aspects of this collaboration was that Messiah and myself were not in total alignment from an epistemological point of view. Here I was reminded, once again of Barnett & Coate when they state 'The extent to which identities and communities are formed around narrow concepts of specialization is striking. Even within the same areas of specialism, there may be tribes adhering to different epistemological tenets' (2005, p.86) and in particular the reference to the role of 'knowledge domain of curricular' (2005, p.86) in curriculum design.

Over time, the nature of my own research for this paper changed, from 'fragile to agile' within a curricular activity to that of an adventure in capturing positive outcomes in co-curricular activities for first-year students on the BADMC course and potentially elsewhere.

For ease of clarity here, I refer to 'co-curricular' in this paper under the definition supplied by the Great Schools Partnership, Glossary of Educational Reform 'activities, programs, and learning experiences that complement, in some way, what students are learning in school—i.e., experiences that are connected to or mirror the academic curriculum'. (creative commons, last updated 10.22.13).

The view proposed by Savin-Baden 'Conflict between expectation, identity, and belief in a learning context can result in staff and students becoming stuck: experiencing disjunction in learning and in teaching, either personally, pedagogically or interactionally' (2008 p.16) interested me.

I was particularly taken by the division that Savin-Baden makes between personal stance – the way in which learners and staff see themselves in relation to the learning context, pedagogical stance – how students saw themselves as learners in an educational environment and interactional stance – the way in which learners operate and construct meaning within groups. Here I refer us back to the keywords for this paper; Individuality, prescribed and value. Perhaps there is a link between Savin-Baden's observations on stance and these three loaded words?

## **Methodology**

Messiah and I constructed the eight-week curriculum together, borrowing the keywords we chose for this paper as the turning points every two weeks throughout the study. Whilst Messiah led on teaching, I opted to record, document, research and hypothesize based on Messiah's initial provocation and epistemological approach.

I believe that Gregory Messiah's approach to teaching core-skills leans towards scaffolding learning, in particular, Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978) We were taking a group that had no prior experience, Messiah was guiding through the process with the hope of students reaching a positive resolution at the end of the period of study.



*Figure. 1 BADMC drawing class in action, Spring 2018*

For my part, I paid particular attention to the aforementioned 'stances' put forward by Savin Baden (2008) and conducted two self-completed questionnaires with participating students in week one and week four of the study. I also conducted a poll of co-curricular studies with twenty-four of my students in week eight of the study, a questionnaire that mirrored the UAL Creative Attribute Framework (CAF) and conducted a focus group with the seven remaining participants in week eight of the study. After the study was concluded I conducted an interview with Gregory Messiah and also a member of UAL Academic Support with whom I'd worked closely with on a number of first-year BADMC students throughout the year. I also spoke anecdotally with my course leader on BADMC about the project.

My inclusion of the CAF as a measurement of student engagement in this study seemed, at first, to be somewhat of a blind alley in this study. We use the CAF at UAL to allude to a measurement of creative graduate success. These are arguably mooted as 'core-skills' (cited in UAL online newsletter Oct. 13, 2011) which include agility, communication, and proactivity amongst others in their criteria list of attributes.

The framework, designed by the Careers and Employability department at UAL 'aims to operate on a meso level, providing bridges or stepping stones between the macro and the micro – a form of curricular or learning design scaffolding' (White, 2013). However, I found that in this case, dealing with first-year students at the start of their journey, and that was therefore unfamiliar with CAF, and perhaps most importantly, not considering either formative or summative assessment as part of the game-plan for the activity, the introduction to the post-session discussion of talk of attribute criteria was found to be confusing to participating students in this circumstance. However, in testament to the durability of the CAF, students did identify key learnings during the study that corresponded to CAF attributes.

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## Creative Attributes Framework is guidance for embedding and enhancing enterprise and employability within the curriculum at **University of the Arts London**.

The framework demonstrates how, through our curriculum, we empower our students and graduates to develop the wide ranging qualities, experience and behaviours that prepare them for the future and enable them to develop and sustain a rewarding professional life.

It articulates what we do well currently through surfacing good practice, ensures students understand they access this learning through the curriculum, and sets out an aspirational territory, in order to help us to further improve.

Enterprise and employability is not new to the curriculum. Nor is it a bolt-on. It is core to a creative education and to our practice at UAL. However, translating enterprise and employability into student learning can be complex. The framework provides a systematic approach that supports curriculum making, and provides descriptors that join enterprise and employability to benchmark a wide range of curriculum delivery.

### The framework sets out three groups of attributes:



We will support our students to practice and apply their learning in a variety of situations inside the University, in the workplace and in the community. These experiences will enable our students to develop the following attributes:



**Proactivity** – the initiative, hard work and passion required to make things happen in society, in the community, and in the workplace.



**Enterprise** – the mindset that takes measured risks and that perceives and creates opportunities, and the resourcefulness to pursue these opportunities in an ethical and sustainable way.



**Agility** – the ability to embrace rapid change and retain an open mind.



We will enable students to communicate about themselves and their ideas and develop their own narratives. They will be open to receiving feedback, adapt to different situations, demonstrating the following attributes:



**Communication** – the skills needed to present themselves, their work and their ideas, to inspire others and respond to feedback.



**Connectivity** – the ability to collaborate with others, create networks and develop and contribute to communities of practice.



**Storytelling** – the ability to demonstrate their unique talents, abilities and experiences to others in an engaging manner.



We will equip our students to thrive in uncertain futures and navigate change by developing the following attributes:



**Curiosity** – the enthusiasm to seek out new perspectives, to create and build on existing knowledge.



**Self-efficacy** – confidence in their abilities, and the ability to respond positively in various situations.



**Resilience** – the willingness to adapt and remain motivated, overcome obstacles, and deal with ambiguity, uncertainty, and rejection.

Figure. 2 University of the Arts, Creative Attributes Framework



## Findings - Capturing Positive Outcomes in Co-Curricular Activities for First Year Students

To combat the rematch of the clichéd argument of 'old-fashioned works best', the initial feedback from the open-ended question 'what other co-curricular activity would you like to partake in?' during the first week of study provided the answer 'computer-based drawing'!

But, to balance the view here, the questionnaire completed by the majority of first-year students at the end of the study period (including those that had not completed the drawing sessions) brought to light the fact that 'traditional core skills' i.e. Drawing et al were still very much of interest to this cohort of students. I received twenty-four responses from first-year students polled on what co-curricular activities they already undertook. Fourteen stated that academic support was a major activity, however, there was a vast appetite for creative classes including photography, bookbinding and letterpress, all of which are on offer as co-curricular activities to students at LCC.

What was this forcing of a 'social hierarchy' that Messiah spoke of? Do we really look down on 'core skills' in favor of digital? And, pertinently, it should be argued that core-skills now include digital and that 'core skills' also include 'soft' skillsets as well as traditional 'graft'. Messiah had alluded to social exclusion in his provocation, arguably this social exclusion could be brought to bear on this study – as classes were outside of the timetabled zone, only those that could afford to spare the time to fit in the extra study were eligible to take part.

- All students were able to place their co-curricular experience in relationship to core-curriculum activities
- Increased proactivity, students stated that they were 'taught to go the extra mile'
- Agility in applying new skills close to deadlines
- Transcending the subject area boundaries, a great experience
- Co-curricular activities are the ideal opportunity for front-loading skillsets prior to undertaking core-curricular activities.

However, as I've already stated, this was quick to become an exercise, not just in the development of traditional core skills, but in learning spaces and, in particular, the role of co-curricular activities as an aid to learning. This was never set to be a rematch of the clichéd argument of 'old-fashioned works best', as Messiah has stated, he is equally comfortable teaching digital skills. This was set to become a case study and ongoing investigation into pedagogic 'stances' and 'learning spaces' (2008 Savin-Baden, pg.12-18) and co-curricular activities.

## Learning Spaces for Co-Curricular Activities

If there is a link between Savin-Baden's observations on stance, co-curricular the keywords for this paper and the UAL CAF then it is one of a leaning towards an attitude of engagement. As one of the student participants noted, 'If I could change one thing about this class it would be 'not focusing on the end product but on the process' (anonymous, 2018).

Perhaps we need to ask ourselves the question 'Why do we need co-curricular activities?'

It would seem from this small study, that although we're constantly approaching learning with the learning journey focused in mind, there is often little time for reflection along the way. Co-curricular activities provide the window along the way: a window that reflects as well as providing a panoramic view of life outside the track.

## Conclusion

The research that we conducted left me with more questions than answers, however, as Paulo Freire states '...There is no such thing as teaching without research and research without teaching' (1998 p.35) and, as we know, these co-curricular meta-activities are ripe for positive research activities.

Do we really look down on 'core skills' in favor of digital? And, pertinently, it should be argued that core-skills now include digital and that 'core skills' also include 'soft' skillsets as well as traditional 'craft'.

Perhaps we should look to contemporary design industry chatter for this. One such provocation, that may in some ways be seen as similar to that of Messiah's calling for 'core-skills', was from Pentagram Partner Natasha Gem, speaking at New York School of Visual Arts. In an article, adapted with permission from her original transcript, on the *Fast Co.* website, Gem states 'I propose that we go from a society obsessed with how things work—that's functionalism—to craft' (Gem, 2018). Our study was an exercise in executing craft, we are comfortable with that.

As previously stated, a great benefit of this study was the opportunity to reflect and share a period of transformative reflection (Biggs & Tang, 1999) with my participating students. The CAF attributes could well be applied to co-curricular activity, but perhaps the point of these activities is to step back from even an informal point of student assessment from a teaching perspective and to allow students to reflect upon their activities. Had my students been aware of the framework before the study we could have used the language contained within with more alacrity and purpose.

Co-curricular, by its very nature largely self-monitoring from a student perspective. From an initial call-out to a class of thirty-three first-year Design Management & Cultures students we received sixteen students in the first week of class. By week four this number had halved again to level out at approximately seven students in class per week until the final session: From a pure numbers perspective, a poor turnout, however, those that took part all gained a valuable experience. And with two-thirds of our first year BADMC students actively engaged with one or more co-curricular activities there is an obvious appetite for future classes.

As this was action research, what of the change to take place? At a strategic level, we've realized that there is a wide range of co-curricular initiatives that staff undertake throughout the design school that would benefit wider-approach and uptake from students across disciplines: This should be encouraged where possible. Often, the success or even the creation of co-curricular activities are sheer resources available, by pooling activities with other course groups, working across teaching staff, as was the case with Gregory Messiah and myself, possibilities may become realities.

This investigation has led on to my next field of inquiry: What is a portfolio of work for students with 'non-traditional' outputs? This harks back to our initial inquiry of traditional and hybrid approaches and one that brings Natasha Gem's recent statement out once more.

As for we too agile? This was a rhetorical question, we are as agile as we need be, to borrow from Barnett and Coates: There is no blueprint for agility.

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