

## **Fostering Student Creativity and Creative Practice with Assessment: a review of practice in a digital media course**

Manuela Barz  
Department of Applied Social Studies  
London Metropolitan University

**Keywords:** *creativity, formative assessment, digital media education*

### **Introduction**

This paper presents a brief outline of the context of digital media education within the University and offers a discussion of the role and nature of creativity within that curriculum. However, its focus is the nature of assessment methods currently used in the BA Digital Media and their capacity to assess student creativity and creative practice. Some implications for learning and teaching practice are presented.

### **Digital Media education**

The BA (Hons) Digital Media is an undergraduate study programme within Media, Information & Communication in the Department of Applied Social Sciences targeting the 'transformed Media Industry' (London University website). Digital media education is fairly new in the Higher Education context and has not been researched to the same extent as other disciplines. Its unique content derives from existing new media practices, one of the fastest growing and developing industries with new standards and software emerging continuously. As a UK report explains: 'It is anticipated that the Interactive Media and Computer Games industries will continue to grow significantly over the next five years as new platforms and technologies emerge and as the significant economic and cultural value of the sector is properly recognized' (UK Skills Action Plan, 2004, p.49).

Teaching concepts come from a mixture of art and design education and professional education, as creativity, reflection on students' own performance and developing skills for employment play an important role in the curriculum. We are looking at a course design using mainly a systems-based approach, focusing 'on effective performance and knowledge exemplified in action' (Stephenson and Weil, 1992 cited in Toohey, 1999, p.67). As in art and design, the BA Digital Media concentrates on 'the ability to understand and to use visual mechanisms [computer technology and software] for making sense of the world' (Jackson, 1997). Additionally, values of the experiential as personal development and the cognitive approach as reflection and reasoning are present as well.

## **'Creativity' and its importance for the digital media curriculum**

It is easier intuitively to understand the meaning of creativity than suggesting a definition. As Petrowski (2000) points out there is no consensus as to whether creativity is located in a person, a product, or a process, and, as Cowdroy and Graaff (2005) state, the idea of creativity 'embraces a multiplicity of notions' and 'a number of dimensions' according to Lindstrom (2006). 'The distinctions between various creative art fields generally derive from the endpoint of the creative process' (Cowdroy and Graaff, 2005). Discussions about creativity formulate a clear distinction between creative process and the product, with a differing emphasis for its assessment (Deleuze and Guatari, 1987; Cowdroy and Graaff, 2005; Jackson, 1995).

Sternberg and Williams (1996) divided students' creativity into three types of thinking:

- *Synthetic ability* - divergent thinking as it is the ability to think of or generate new, novel, and interesting ideas, spontaneously make connections between ideas, or groups of things;
- *Analytical ability* - ability to think convergently in that it requires critical thinking and appraisal as one analyses and evaluates thoughts, ideas, and possible solutions - key in the realm of creative work because not all ideas are good ones, some need to be culled; commonly we think of this ability as "critical thinking";
- *Practical ability* - ability to translate abstractions and theories into realistic applications - sell or communicate one's ideas to others, to make others believe that ideas, works, or products are valuable, different, useful, innovative, unusual, or worthy of consideration - finding a potential audience for one's creative work'.

A recent study, 'the imaginative curriculum study' (2005), looked into academics understanding of creativity and the following associations were identified:

- 'Originality (making a contribution that adds to what already exists)
- Being imaginative (using imagination to think in certain ways that move us beyond the obvious and the known into the unknown, that see the world in different ways or from different perspectives that take us outside the boxes we normally inhabit and lead to the generation of new ideas and novel interpretations)
- Exploring for the purpose of discovery: (experimenting and taking risks; openness to new ideas and experiences)
- Doing / producing new things (invention)
- Doing / producing things no-one has ever done before (innovation)
- Doing /producing things that have been done before but differently (adaptation, transference).
- Communication – which is integral to the creative process.'

(Jackson and Shaw, 2005)

Fryer (2006) undertook a study of UK National Teaching Fellows' perception on creativity, with a similar result:

'When asked to describe in words what creativity means to them, the fellows emphasised different constructs, which may be broadly categorized as:

- Thinking
- Doing
- Thinking and doing
- The arts
- Self-expression
- Creativity as a continuum
- Context' (Fryer, 2006, p. 78)

Both of those studies and the definition offered by Sternberg and Williams (1996) demonstrate a wider consensus on creativity as 'the ability to produce work that is both novel (i.e. original, unexpected) and appropriate (i.e. useful, adaptive concerning task constraints)' (Sternberg and Lubart, 1999, p.3) and is 'grounded in everyday abilities such as conceptual thinking, perception, memory, and reflective self-criticism' (Bowden, 2004).

Creativity has become a driving force of economic growth in information society and 'a key resource for individuals and societies' (Barnett, 2000 cited in Smith-Bingham, 2006). Howkins (2001) stresses that '[p]eople with ideas – people who own ideas – have become more powerful than people who work machines and in many cases, more powerful than people who own machines'. Florida (2002) even sees '...the rise of a new social class ... the Creative Class derives its identity and values from its role as purveyors of creativity'. Universities need to prepare students for work life and, as Schieb (2002) proposes, this implies two broad goals for policy:

- foster dynamism and creativity;
- enhance capacities for learning (Schieb, 2002, p. 16).

Being part of the new media industry does require all the abilities as defined in the studies cited above. That makes creativity a key factor targeted by the BA Digital Media that students need to be prepared for during university study.

### **Current assessment practice**

The main assessments used in practice-based modules for the BA Digital Media are summative assessments at the end of the term in form of a project and a critical/evaluation report. Some modules include formative assessment in form of a mid-term presentation of work-in-progress as well. The assessment methods and criteria discussed here in more detail pertain to two second-year, practice-based, core modules of the BA in Digital Media currently convened by the author.

### *Assessment practice Multimedia Design SM2008N:*

This module focuses more on practice than theory. The assessment requires group work of 2-3 students and consists of a combination of formative assessment via an oral presentation in week 8 (weighting 20%), and two summative assessments due in week 14 in form of an evaluation report (1000 words) containing self- and peer-assessment (weighting 30%) and a final project (weighting 50%). The emphasis lies on the design project, which provides the opportunity to explore, examine and apply the techniques and skills discussed in the module in relation to concept development, contemporary media and cultural context. Students are required to come up with original ideas starting in week 1, present their work in progress (prototype) in week 8 and develop a meaningful project over the term.

To successfully complete the module students need the skills that academics have identified as creativity or being creative. The assessment criteria include indicators for creativity such as 'imagination', 'critical thinking', and the 'ability to produce solutions'.

### *Assessment practice Creative Digital Video SM2003N:*

This module provides a good mixture of theory and practice. The summative assessment due in week 14 consists of two pieces of coursework: a digital video (weighting 50%) and a critical report of 2000 words (weighting 50%). Although the focus of this module lies on assembling a product in form of a one-minute video, equal weighting has been applied to the creative process evident in the critical report. An additional non-graded formative assessment is implemented at week 10 as opportunity to gain feedback from tutor and peers.

For this particular module students pick a film genre of choice and explore it visually. To be successful students are required to use their imagination and experiment with existing video conventions and theories – simply put, they have to be creative.

## **Comparison and evaluation of assessment methods**

To evaluate the assessment methods regarding their effectiveness and ability to foster student's creativity I will be using the following 'fit-for-purpose' practical assessment questions from Pickford and Brown (2006, p. 2-3).

### *Why are we assessing?*

The assessment serves to test students' creative ability to practically apply the knowledge gained in lectures and workshops, to give feedback and to help students to adjust their practice. Students are graded according to their ability, which gives them opportunity to reflect on their performance and make informed decisions about their academic progression.

### *What is it and how are we assessing?*

Assessment methods of both modules centre on the quality of the design artefact. The additional evaluation/critical report focuses on a combination of theoretical aspects and practical application.

Since '[d]esign practice requires of a complex interrelationship of skills, knowledge and understanding' (Jackson, 1995), projects are an effective assessment method as a 'good all-roundability testing' for 'sampling a wide range of practical, analytical and interpretative skills' (Brown, 2001, p. 13). But as Cowan (2006) rightfully asks, how can we be sure that the work is truly original as it 'may simply be something that was recycled (not plagiarised) from a piece of prior creativity' (p.158)? Cowdroy and De Graaff (2005) state that without 'the originating concept' it is not possible to reveal 'the essential criteria for evaluation of creative ability'.

In the *Multimedia Design* module, the required evaluation report is hardly comprehensive and often merely descriptive; but it does reveal 'awareness of how the innovatory product was conceived' (Cowan, 2006, p. 158) and invite reflection on teamwork and own performance; and the self- and peer- assessments indicate roles played by the individual.

Ideally, for the *Creative Digital Video* module students should acquire a diary and create a portfolio with sketches, storyboards, etc., so as to illustrate the 'creative process behind the concept' (Cowdroy and De Graaff, 2005, p. 508). This should accompany the critical report, but experience shows that the 'extra work' is rarely done or submitted. However, the report and portfolio work do help underline some of the intentions of the creator and the creator's self-expression if there are any ambiguities in the finished video, as it requires a rationale and reflections on techniques used.

Presentations are used to assess students' work in progress and communication skills, combining all three types of thinking (synthetic, analytical, practical) as described by Sternberg and Williams (1996).

### *Who is assessing?*

Primarily the tutor judges the assessments for both modules. Although peer and self-assessment are part of the report for the *Multimedia Design* module, they are hardly reflective as students often overrate projects, and their own and peer (group members) performance. Clearly they do need more guidance in understanding the process. More opportunities for intra-peer group and peer assessment in form of informal feedback/discussion are given on the day of the presentation and could 'prompt deep approaches to learning' (Boud, 1995, p.35).

### *When does assessment take place?*

The main summative assessments are due at the end of the term but both modules provide opportunities for formative feedback (as detailed above). Students who have not finished their projects by the end of the term are able to submit during the assessment period in summer without penalty.

## Suggestions for future practice

As Oliver *et al.* (2006) observe, '[s]tudents' experiences of creativity in the curriculum are complex and often confusing' (p.57). In order to stimulate creativity and creative practice, assessment has to be stimulating and encouraging.

The assessment methods used for both modules discussed here are capable of fostering students creativity. However, then main focus for both modules lies on the practice-based task and its completion, rather than on the creative process. This is typical of courses generally, where '[a]ssessment by product is the common approach across disciplines and levels of ability' (Cowan, 2006, p. 158). Although reports and presentations are used to assess students' reflection and theoretical understanding of the project produced, these reports are often understood as a production diary of success and failure rather than an informed account of professional development and reflection on the creative process. The dilemma is that if we would look to giving more weighting to assessing the creative process, we might encounter more problems regarding accuracy of assessment. This is because the creative process and approaches towards creativity are different for each learner and 'unpredictable and difficult to capture' (Cowan, 2006, p. 157), yet assessing processes focus 'on what is learned' rather than on 'what is taught' (Pickford, Brown, 2006, p.99).

Hence, developmental work collected over the term and documented in portfolios accompanying an end report, in order to demonstrate the processes behind creative decisions, would be a beneficial means for students to evaluate and reflect on their own work and for the tutor to assess creative ability. Another positive effect would be a reduction in plagiarism, as the tutor is aware of work undertaken at different developmental stages. Whether this would be a feasible solution - since it is 'one of the most demanding of assessments for tutors' (Pickford, Brown, 2006, p.102) - is concern of a different discussion.

Self and peer assessment could be used more effectively by 'involvement of students in identifying standards and/or criteria to apply to their work and making judgments about the extent to which they have met these criteria and standards' (Boud 1991, p. 5, in: Boud, 1995, p. 12) and integrating it into the creative process and formative assessment over the term - instead of just having students fill in a form at the end of the term that clearly has no real meaning to them, as last cohorts have demonstrated. Self-assessment would be a good additional assessment tool for all modules on the BA Digital Media: as Oliver *et al.* (2006) argue, 'claims to an emergent creative identity can only be warranted if they can be articulated' (p.58).

Within the creative industry and world of work in general being able to communicate ideas to others is a high valued skill; therefore its place within the assessment of creativity is of high importance. Presentation of work-in-progress as well as end products brings opportunities for immediate feedback - an 'important part of the assessment process ... [and] an essential part of the learning process'

(Unwin, 1993, p.7). It can provide students with the chance to discuss their work with a wider audience, and give indications about the quality of their work at different stages of development, rather than receiving feedback only after project completion. Hence, presentations should be understood as part of the creative process - a formative assessment method-fostering student's creativity and learning. They should form an integral part of assessment methods within the practice-based modules.

## Conclusion

*'Assessment practices must send the right signals to students about what they should be learning and how they should be learning'* (Biggs, 2003, p. 140).

Overall the assessment methods currently used in Digital Media to assess student's creativity and creative ability are fit-for-purpose; they address the abilities identified in benchmarking statements from the QAA for art and design, and academic definitions and perceptions of creativity. Improving students' learning through assessment could be achieved by shifting the focus from the product towards the creative process. Additional continuous formative assessments in the form of presentations, portfolios and group discussions could foster creativity, create more feedback opportunities and guidance for students, and stimulate the creative process throughout the term. Being aware of student's tendencies towards what Peterson et al (1993) calls 'learned helplessness' and 'learned dependencies' the concentration should be on providing 'frequent feedback of progress' for 'repeated affirmation of their growing capabilities' (Bandura 1997, p.217).

## References

- Bandura, A. (1997) *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control*, New York: Freeman
- Biggs, J. (2003), *Teaching for quality learning at university*, Buckingham: SRHE and Open University Press, second edition
- Boud, D. (1995), *Enhancing learning through self-assessment*, London: Kogan Page
- Bowden, M. A. (2004) *The Creative Mind*, second edition, London: Routledge
- Brown, G. (2001), *Assessment: A guide for lecturers*, LTSN Generic Centre
- Cowan, J. (2006), *How should I assess creativity*, in Jackson, N. (ed.) *Developing Creativity in Higher education: An imaginative curriculum*, New York, Routledge
- Cowdroy, R. and Graaff de, E. (2005), *Assessing highly - creative ability*, *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, Vol. 30, No. 5, October 2005, pp. 507-518
- Deleuze, G. and Guatarri, F. (1987), *A thousand plateaus*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press
- Ducatel, K., Burgelman, J.-C. and Bogdanowicz, M. (2000); *Scenarios for Europe's Media Industry: employment trends and changing skills*; the journal of policy, regulation and strategy for telecommunications, information and media; vol.2; no.5, pp. 496-516
- Florida, R. (2002), *'The Rise of the Creative Class: And How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life'*, New York, Basic Books

- Fryer, M. (2006) *Facilitating Creativity in Higher Education: A brief account of national teaching Fellows' views* in Jackson, N., et. al (2006) *Developing Creativity in Higher Education: An imaginative curriculum*, New York, Routledge
- Howkins, J. (2001) *The Creative Economy: How people make money from ideas*, London, Penguin
- Jackson, B. (1997), *Values and Traditions in Teaching and Learning Art and Design*, Middlesex University, UK
- Jackson, N. and Shaw, M. (2005), *Imaginative Curriculum Study: Subject Perspectives on Creativity: a preliminary synthesis* [Internet], The Higher Education Academy, p. 2, available from: <http://www.palatine.ac.uk/files/1004.pdf>
- Lindstroem, L. (2006), *Creativity: What is it? Can you assess it? Can it be taught?* International Journal of Design education, Vol. 21, No.1, pp. 53 – 66
- Oliver, M. et al. (2006), *Students experiences of creativity*, in Jackson, N., et. al (2006) *Developing Creativity in Higher Education: An imaginative curriculum*, New York, Routledge
- Peterson, C., Maier, S. F. and Seligman, M. E. P. (1993), *Learned helplessness: A theory for the age of personal control*, New York, University Press
- Petrowski, M. J. (2000), *Creativity research: implications for teaching, learning and thinking*, reference service review, Vol. 28, No. 4, pp. 304-312
- Pickford, R. and Brown, S. (2006), *Assessing skills and practice*, New York, Routledge
- Schieb, P. A. (2002) *OECD International Futures Programme*. Presentation to the STRATA-ETAN 'Foresight for higher education/research relations' group, Brussels, 26 March.
- Smith-Bingham, R. (2006), *Public policy, innovation and the need for creativity*, in Jackson, N., et. al (2006) *Developing Creativity in Higher Education: An imaginative curriculum*, New York, Routledge
- Sternberg, R. J. and Lubart, T. I. (1999), *The Concept of Creativity: Prospects and Paradigms* in Sternberg, R. J. (ed.) (1999), *Handbook of Creativity*, New York, Cambridge University Press
- Sternberg, R. J. and Williams, W. M. (1996), *How to develop student creativity*, Alexandria, Virginia, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development
- Toohey, S. (1999) *Designing courses for Higher Education*, SRHE and Open University Press, Buckingham
- Unwin, A. (1993), *Assessing presentations, Series 8: Skills Development*, Newcastle, University of Northumbria
- UK Skills Action Plan for the Interactive Media and Computer Games Industries, (2004), *Creating the future*, [Internet] available from: [http://www.skillset.org/uploads/pdf/asset\\_6076.pdf?3](http://www.skillset.org/uploads/pdf/asset_6076.pdf?3) [accessed 19/06/08]
- Van den Berg, I. et al. (2006), *Design principles and outcomes of peer assessment in higher education*, Studies in Higher Education, 31(3), pp. 341–356

### **Biographical note:**

Manuela Barz is a lecturer in the field of digital media in the Department of Applied Social Studies, **Email:** [m.barz@londonmet.ac.uk](mailto:m.barz@londonmet.ac.uk)