**Investigations**
**in university teaching and learning** vol. 6 (1) spring 2010 ISSN 1740-5106

# Promoting Student Engagement and Creativity: an evaluation of the 'Spatial Concepts' module

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**Keywords**: *student engagement, tutorials, self/peer assessment, creativity, community of practice, groupwork*

## Background

This paper is a development of a curriculum evaluation of the Spatial Concepts Module on Interior Design Foundation Degree (FdA). The evaluation reviewed in particular the level of student engagement subsequent to the introduction of extensive self/peer assessment (supported by tutor-moderated feedback) and more challenging learning scenarios focussed on creative design processes. The objective of the changes was the promotion of student involvement and interaction; critical and reflective students; creative engagement; and a supportive "community of practice" (Lave and Wenger (1991) cited in Sims and Shreeve 2008). The evaluation raised questions regarding the ongoing use of individual tutorials as a teaching method and the understanding of creativity held by tutors and students.

## Context

The cohort's characteristics include: often mature students; not always strong academically; high levels of life skills; broad range of cultural backgrounds; frequently English as a second language; often some dyslexic students; good problem based skills; committed students but not always deep learners; grade focussed for degree or workplace ambitions; recently a rise in school leavers.

This module comes at the end of the first year after a semester of skill building. It consolidates skills and introduces design processes through problem-based learning (PBL), encouraging creative solutions with high levels of critical reflective thinking. Learning is supported via workshops, demonstrations, design studio work, group seminars for design theory, review of ongoing work, short lectures, presentations, small group tasks, site visits and tutorials.

The students' learning needs focus around developing student confidence, critical skills, appropriate architectural language and discursive skills. Feedback had been

continuous via tutorial guidance (Schon 1987) and via tutor-led critiques. The self/peer assessment process was introduced to improve this, for students to engage fully in the assessment process and design discussions, to take active leadership of critiques and presentations away from tutors. More challenging learning scenarios were introduced, specifically with regard to conceptual process, to make the creative process more explicit and less ambiguous.

## Evaluation Aims, Approach, Philosophy and Process

The design process is problem-based and incorporates the socio-constructivist Kolb Learning cycle in practice. The approach to learning needs to be experiential, cognitive and socially critical (Toohey 2009). Does the module support this learning paradigm, encouraging deep learning, intrinsically motivated and critical thinkers? Is the module coherent? Does it sit within the correct framework of curriculum as "process" and "praxis"? This educational theory underpinned the evaluation of the module.

The evaluation focused on an appraisal of the module's pedagogical objectives in relation to the introduction of tutor moderated self/peer assessment and the new teaching scenarios. Is deeper student engagement and discussion facilitated? Are confidence, architectural vocabulary and critical, reflective thinking supported? Are the benefits of the community of practice (COP) visible to students? Does it support and engage them in their design process? Does 'scaffolding' ideas (Cowan 2006) assist students in understanding process and critical reflection? Is there constructive alignment or congruence between learning outcomes, teaching and assessment (Biggs 1996)? Is the understanding of creative design solutions and its assessment shared? Does that understanding and our teaching support creative engagement?

As an evaluation tool, the module content was translated into an integrated concept-mapping table incorporating course design, pedagogy, skills development and overall alignment. Student feedback was obtained via qualitative pre-planned interviews, aas many have English as a second language, thus giving a potential for misunderstandings through the use of questionnaires (Cowan 2006). In conjunction, the review of module specifications, student attendance, formative/summative assessments, learning facilities, the tutor's reflective log, peer and tutor observations, student feedback forms and submitted projects, all provided evidence of learning that is ultimately more reliable than questionnaires or students' memories.

## Review, Analysis and Evaluation

From the interviews it emerged that all student respondents saw the benefits of COP development that self/peer assessment and group tasks brought about, and

they all want more of it. They agreed self/peer assessment had given deeper understanding of assessment criteria, engaged them more confidently in supportive group discussion and supported their development as critical/reflective thinkers. This is borne out in evidence of self/peer assessment grades, which matched those of staff assessors, with generally higher grades being achieved across the board. Heartening additional benefits were improvements in confidence, course work and meeting of learning outcomes, better grades and production of creative work in the least able students. During the activity itself students were 'without exception' engaged in a continuous dialogue of critical thinking at the time, as documented in my reflective journal and supported by student feedback and peer tutor observation. Moreover, self/peer assessment emphasises the iterative process of design and experiential nature of learning.

Students could see benefits in 'scaffolding' and bouncing ideas off each other as a group, but did not describe it as improving their individual understanding of process and critical reflection. More group work, collaborative concept generation, group design development and reflective practice (paralleling the workplace) and engaging reflection on activities undertaken could build on this. Several found fellow students' negative comments unacceptable because they perceived these students to be less able or less engaged in their studies than themselves. This could be mitigated by students setting up conversational ground rules, more directed, rotational group work, and adopting role plays of client, local resident etc, thereby making feedback less about personal opinion.

The benefits of belonging to a cohesive group/environment - taking emphasis away from tutor, focusing on student directed learning, encouraging independence, ownership of studies, seeing other students work, being inspired by fellow students, building an architectural vocabulary, viewing the group as a source of advice – was highly valued by students, particularly when they are struggling. It helped in their commitment and engagement to the module as independent intrinsically motivated learners. Interestingly, the success of the self/peer assessment flagged up for students the unproductive nature of individual tutorials. Many said this sense of cohesion has dissipated with the advent of more delivery through individual tutorials in the second year.

The teaching of the Spatial Concepts module supports the COP and the Kolb learning cycle through PBL and self/peer assessment. However, the concept-mapping table (evaluation tool) also flagged up issues of module structure and high numbers of tutorials. There is insufficient alignment to experiential learning and the Kolb learning cycle via these tutorials. They tend to be unfocused, inconsistent in content, time heavy and arguably less useful than active sessions, which would help consolidate skills and explore creative processes. Almost all students saw tutorials negatively.

> *"When you have a tutorial with a teacher they don't really teach you; they are just saying what they want you to do…We don't learn from the tutor. One to one is no good".* (Student interviewee)

Less confident students suffer particularly under tutorial teaching and become isolated. Individual tutorials do not promote or sustain a cohesive supportive group, independent learners, critical reflective thinking, ownership, the learning cycle, deep learning and the intrinsically and self motivated student. Nor do they encourage "the development of a personal design philosophy" (Module Handbook 2009). Crucially, they do not support the required learning paradigm.

More structured design tasks and creative methods for problem-solving meet the pedagogical criteria of this evaluation and were appreciated by all students as a means of consolidating learning, an opportunity for group work, peer learning, generating a more supportive environment, developing personal creative design processes, skill building and sheer enjoyment.

Through student interviews discussing these positive aspects of structured design tasks it became apparent neither students nor tutors shared understandings of creativity and its assessment. It became clear we do not explicitly assess creativity; this undermines students' desires to be creative and our own efforts to engage students in more creative practice. As they perceive it:

> *"They just give you a mark for the presentation not for your creativity."* (Student interviewee)

As suggested by the educational literature and experience, we need to assess creativity clearly and transparently as a three-stage process of 'conceptualisation', 'schematisation' and 'actualisation' (Cowdroy and Williams 2006) – to encourage students, to see how and when creativity and critical thinking takes place, when to apply their skills and the evidence (the work submitted) by which creativity is assessed.

This lack of understanding did not generally undermine student engagement. Attendance was consistently high, submitted work and assessment was to a high standard and students said they were enjoying the module, both at the time and in these interviews. Actual work submitted was without doubt creative and individualist, and met learning outcomes. However it brought to the fore that whilst grades were accurate and reflective of module documentation, the lack of reference to creative input was perhaps not desirable at this stage if we are truly interested in our students being creative problem solvers.

This was further evidenced in student feedback immediately after the module. All said presentation was the area they spent most time on, which is reflective of the

module handbook documentation. However, when the project is about conceptual process/design development, are students' efforts skewed in one direction?

Module documentation supports this presentation emphasis. In Assessment Strategy two of the three points refer to the quality of the presentation, one refers to "quality of imaginative and creative solutions". The question here is two fold, is it appropriate that the assessment is so presentation focused at this stage? if so then are we serious about encouraging creativity?

In addition, assessment of creativity needs to be transparent, otherwise students over work the 'actualisation' stage at the expense of concept generation and design development. This lack of assessment balance and understanding about design as a process will not help them in the workplace or on the BA degree.

Module documentation contains further misleading statements with respect to creativity and the design process. It refers to "systematic methods for the solution of design problems" there is nothing systematic about the solution of a design problem. It is a holistic approach, not linear; this is what makes it inherently difficult. Outcomes refer to design solutions, which "conform to visual and functional needs of the client/user"; 'conforming' is a term in direct contradiction to creativity. One can see clearly why students do not feel we are assessing creativity.

## Recommendations

In order to enhance the module, using the educational theory that underpins this evaluation as a core decision supporter, we should:

- retain the core content of experiential problem based learning but make a radical creative change to the tutorial content – substituting individual tutor-led tutorials with creative teaching activities, such as role play, fish bowling peer reviews and many more active learning scenarios and group peer led tutorials;
- build on the COP with further opportunities for group support and critical reflective practice in a journal;
- build in classroom assessment techniques (CATs) for timely feedback and future re-evaluation;
- expand the reflective cycle of learning and iterative nature of learning with shorter creative projects with less onerous submission requirements, consolidating skills from Semester 1, but not at the expense of creativity and conceptual process;
- review and modify the discrepancies and emphasis in the module handbook.

The key dilemma is whether in the current economic context we are doing a disservice to our students by emphasising technical career specific presentation skills. Many, maybe most, will not go on to be interior designers. We should be

questioning how this education adds to each student's journey? The ability to creatively problem solve is a most desirable and transferable skill.

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## Biographical note


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