Assessing Art subjects in Personal and Professional Development modules

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Introduction

How do we judge whether, say, a Digital Photography student has achieved a pass on a Personal and Professional Development (PPD) module on a Foundation Degree? Presumably in the same way as for every other type of Foundation Degree (FD) student: that is, whether they meet the assessment criteria and Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs) of the module they are studying. But Digital Photography comes under the category of Art and Design and as a result has certain implicit factors that give rise to complex issues of assessment (Jackson, 1995).

Assessment should take place within the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (QAA, 2008). Student achievement is benchmarked against National Standards for Art and Design (QAA, 2008a), while the Codes of Practice, particularly Code 6 on Assessment and Code 10 on Foundation Degrees, are crucial for an understanding of the underpinning framework (QAA, 2006).

In this article I will examine some problematic aspects of assessing a PPD module, focusing on Digital Photography as an exemplum of an Art and Design degree. I will then offer some ideas as to how these issues were resolved at Batley School of Art and Design (BSAD), which is part of the Leeds Met Regional University Network (RUN).

The PPD module

The RUN scheme adopts a consistent approach to Personal Development Planning (PDP). It encourages students to become "effective, independent and confident self-directed learners", embraces "systematic reflective practice" and believes in supporting students in gaining "core skills and knowledge in planning for their future personal, educational and career development". The RUN's framework for PDP is flexible and depends on differences in professional requirements, academic area, pedagogic approaches and student aspiration. The RUN framework also questions how personal development relates to specific courses. In other words there is a built-in sensitivity to difference in terms of both awards and individuals (Leeds Metropolitan University, 2005).

In practice the PPD module offers students a skills audit, an action plan, key skill development and SWOT analysis, reflects on students' learning styles and prepares them for assessment and their future career, whether that is academic progression onto a top-up degree or progression into the commercial/industrial world. There is, of course, a practical, 'employability-based' ideology that underpins FD subjects. But many Art and Design disciplines are particularly attuned to self-reflective practice and concerned with students positioning themselves within the market. Sometimes these skills are geared towards working as a sole practitioner, or operating in partnerships or larger organisations. All these facets of professional development are particularly relevant to Digital Photography. So there should be no problem in assessing this subject when it comes to PPD modules. Yet the focus of the ILOs for PPD on the RUN scheme may not seem immediately relevant to the key area on which Digital Photography students most need to focus, namely the visual. If the focus of the ILOs is on organisation, personal development and business, then the artistic product will not be the main body of work being assessed (Brown, Race & Rust, 2002). From the point of view of subject specialists, students and employers, the most important aspect of Digital Photography will be the accumulation of knowledge and technical skills in taking digital photographs. This will involve developing artistic skills, design techniques and IT applications, yet students' achievement will be judged through ILOs that seem to focus on personal and professional development. PPD modules represent four out of the 16 FD modules, while another four are similarly based on prescribed non-visual ILOs of Work-Based Learning (WBL) modules. Thus, it could be said that half of this Digital Photography degree has ILOs that do not relate to the visual (Dewsbury College Scheme Document, 2005). In this paper I am focusing on this issue with respect to PPDs.

PPDs are crucial to the Foundation Degree Scheme because they underpin the FD focus on job orientation and self-development. The ILOs are the same for each of the four PPD modules, and should represent a development with each module showing progression in knowledge and key skills. The four ILOs specify that upon completion of each PPD module, students should:

1. demonstrate awareness of different approaches to learning and the resolution of problems

2. recognise techniques and methods of practice common to organisations in the Digital Photography sector

3. communicate orally by demonstration and in writing in a clear and effective manner on limited and well-defined topics

4. be self-critical and reflective in extracting learning, knowledge and skills from the learning experience in the subject area of Digital Photography.

If these ILOs are not interpreted in terms of constructing assignments that develop skills and knowledge for producing digital photographs, then the students on the degree will have their focus skewed towards being self-reflective, good at speaking and writing, and understanding business organisations rather becoming digital photographers. This might fulfil Jackson's 'deep knowledge' requirement, but will it improve the student technically (Jackson, 1995)?

The challenge is to write assignments that allow students to produce a wide range of artwork and yet meet the four learning outcomes of the PPD modules. Students have to be aware that they are being assessed in terms of these outcomes. It would be no good if they were producing excellent work artistically or even producing work for industry, publication or success in national competitions (which was the case with a range of FD Art and Design students at BSAD), if they did not meet the module's academic criteria.

Thus there is a 'problematic aspect' in assessing practical 'art' work in an academic context, for commercial/industrial requirements are not always co-extensive with academic achievement. The 'personal' and 'professional' nature of the PPD's ILOs means that passing this module could privilege the good writer over the person with design flair. Ideally there should, of course, be a synthesis of the two: depth of self-reflection (Schon, 1983) and visual design. Self-reflection could be judged by criteria offered, for example, on the Leeds Met Employability website.

However, when we judge the visual for assessment purposes, it is generally in terms of the verbal or numerical. Examiners and moderators assess a visual experience in Art and Design through attaching statements of achievement, grades, numbers or percentages to students' physical work. There is a translation involved in evaluating a physical object in terms of a grade. This process assumes a range of aesthetic judgements, including the quality of work, its range, the amount produced, issues of composition, colour, balance, energy, engagement, difference and ultimately creativity. Yet the visual may well resist linguistic categories. Assessment through grading/number and language is not judging like with like. In the sphere of language or mathematical assessment, the medium or language of assessment is usually the same as the activities being assessed: words and number are used. In art assessment, we are bringing criteria to bear on visual material other than whether students meet the ILOs. In other words there is an implicit judgement about the student's visual skill base rather than PPD criteria. If we followed Sadler and shifted to a focus on 'standards' of achievement as opposed to criteria-based assessment, this might help students understand how they are being assessed (Sadler, 2005). However, current RUN ILOs ensure that a wide range of vocational and technical courses are taught and assessed consistently across many colleges in a large geographical area. Assessment criteria were developed for individual modules within the frame of overarching ILOs.

Some solutions

Assignments were written at BSAD that stretched students technically and visually as digital photographers. Students had to engage with industry and thereby fulfil both academic and commercial requirements. They had to produce industry-standard photographs, design cards for specific companies, create an offline digital photo gallery and enter photography competitions. These were all ways of contextualising the ILOs.

Students were also required to interview practising professional photographers and give in-depth comments in a self-reflective log. The oral element was covered through spoken presentations, selling work and peer 'crits' reflecting on the work of other students, while crucially applying ILOs to their peers' work (Ramsden, 2002). The point of this was to help students internalise the criteria by which they were themselves being judged. This opened a discourse on academic, aesthetic and commercial considerations in the production of a photograph.

ILOs appeared on the PPD specification sheet, where they are mandatory, but were also located at the head of the assignment and feedback sheets, forming the basis of the teaching, so it was clear that all activities had to be achieved in terms of these outcomes.

In conclusion, the application of ILOs to a specific piece of artwork involves complex processes and judgements. Foundation Degree PPD modules are assessed and certificated in terms of academic, aesthetic and commercial concerns. The 'security' (QAA Codes of Practice 6) of assessment decisions is ultimately the responsibility of awarding institutions and this is achieved through the processes of internal and external moderation. Nevertheless, this is arrived at through complex discussion, weighing up how Learning Outcomes and assessment criteria have been achieved in a range of contexts. This complex relationship between Foundation Degree ILOs and assessing Art and Design work now needs further academic exploration.

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