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First- and last-year experience: assessment, learning and teaching on a top-up degree

Oliver Bray

"I have felt a constant determination to get it right – whatever 'it' might be – the first time, because it's not only my first but probably also my last time too."
(Stacey Grahame, Contemporary Performance Practices student, 2008)

This paper looks at the role of the top-up degree as a first- and last-year student experience. In the light of the increasing number of foundation degrees (FdAs) offered as higher education provision nationally, many students have a desire to progress onto top-up degrees. This paper looks specifically at the BA Honours Contemporary Performance Practices (CPP) programme offered at Leeds Met as an example of innovative design that addresses the numerous issues surrounding a 'one-year-only' programme.

In 2006 (the latest statistics that are available from UCAS), 14,673 prospective students were accepted onto FdAs in the UK, accounting for almost 4% of the total acceptances onto degree, HND and FdA courses. Many of these courses are established by universities but many others are HE courses embedded within further education (FE) institutions that have particular relationships with specific universities. For example, at Leeds Met we have relationships with Park Lane College, Leeds and Harrogate College, who run FdAs in Theatre Studies and Contemporary Performance respectively. Their students have a 'right of entry' to the CPP programme provided they successfully complete their FdAs. CPP also attracts students from a number of other institutions, including Wakefield College and Newcastle College. An acknowledgment of the fact that the students will be arriving on CPP with a diverse set of experiences is key to the successful running of the programme. In many ways, students new to the programme have to be a combination of first- and last-year students; arriving to an institutional expectation that although new, they will perform at Level 3 standard.

As is the case with most arts-based academic provision, CPP has to reflect current practices in the field. It is essential that there is a simultaneous acknowledgement of both the canon of performance practice and the current cultural climate in which the programme situates itself. In

the case of CPP, all staff teaching on the programme are established current artists and/or performance-makers in the field, practising an ethos that promotes a notion of praxis (theory-informed practice) combining and balancing intelligent, theoretical ideas and pragmatic, 'real-world' experiences of making a performance. CPP students come to the course with varying degrees of both professional and academic experience and appreciate the general ethos of the course as both reflective of their individuality and ambition, but also their desire and need to contextualise theoretical ideas through 'real-world' practice.

A closer look at the design of the curriculum demonstrates how it is sympathetic to the 'one and only year' student and complementary to the ethos of Performing Arts at Leeds Met. The first module that the students encounter is called 'The Performance Project: Mapping the Terrain', a heavily practical, performance-based module that is delivered in a 'short fat' burst of five weeks. As the title suggests, the module is about establishing a working vocabulary, a similar language, which is crucial in the context of the diverse nature of the students. This intensive module places students immediately into a staff-led 'making' space, and within the first four days the students have presented their first piece of performance work. The module is not only reflective of the 'real-world' demands placed on performance-makers but also exposes the students straight away to the demands of a top-up degree – covering a lot of ground in a limited time. The intensity of the module helps students to understand the context of the work with which they will be engaging during the programme and this exposure very quickly demonstrates the 'tone' of the course. Assessment models built into the programme have been designed to be accessible to a diverse range of students. For example, on the module 'Performance Works' the students are assessed through the presentation of a 'Statement in Action'.

Statement in Action (50%)

The production of an 'active' response to one or more pre-determined statements selected by the student at the start of the module. The Statement in Action is an individual creative/performative articulation of the questions and possibilities implicit in the chosen statement, within the context of an enquiry into the work of the artists examined during the course of study.
(Book of Modules, 2007)

This assessment model gives the students creative freedom in their presentation of the results of their academic enquiry. Students are given the opportunity to combine areas of learning and interest. For example, in preparation for this assessment, students interested in provocative performance work might engage in the following activities:

- investigation into a particularly provocative performance they have witnessed live
- locating why they see the work as provocative (including placing it in the context of their own experience and other artists/thinkers/theorists they have studied on the module)
- creating a performative/creative response that reflects their position on the work and frames the implications of that position.

This model reinforces the course's ethos of producing 'thinking artists' and embeds reflective learning into the assessment. It is crucially important that the 'first and only year' experience inculcates reflection into assessment in this way, since we cannot wait until the end of the year to reflect.

"[T]hey are required to develop as artists, as reflective practitioners, and apply those practical skills acquired previously whilst developing during the year."
(External Examiner's Report, 2007)

Students studying CPP are expected to see a lot of contemporary performance work during their year on the course. The module 'Performance Works' runs alongside the programme of work shown at the Leeds Met Gallery & Studio Theatre. Students

watch the entire Autumn season of work (up to ten performances), which is a deliberate strategy to saturate the new students in the work in which they are expected to develop expertise over the coming year. Students studying on CPP very quickly become absorbed into the 'community of practice' (Lave & Wenger, 1999) of studying contemporary performance at Leeds Met. In crude terms, we aim to engage students in three ways to frame their intensive learning in this area; seeing a lot of performance, making a lot of performance and talking a lot about performance.

"[A]s students, the intensity of the one year top-up definitely encouraged us to step-up in terms of commitment and professionalism."
(Nathan Maguire, CPP student, 2008)

CPP has been described by some students as feeling like a 'crash course'. Starting a top-up year, compared with a conventional undergraduate degree, will inevitably involve a different kind of transition from Level 2 to Level 3. Indeed, anecdotal evidence suggests that students feel that they are at the bottom of a very steep learning curve. It is the job of the staff delivering the programme to make sure that students are acclimatised, ready and fired up for the journey ahead of them.

"There is something unique about the undergraduate careers of the students on this programme and this requires a particular kind of approach both at academic and pastoral levels."
(External Examiner's Report, 2007)

Students may be more likely on the Level 3 top-up to experience anxieties more usually associated with the first-year experience of undergraduate students: worries about their abilities, coming to terms with their workload, managing time efficiently and even missing their home and family (many students studying FdAs do so while still with their families; for many of our students, studying CPP represents their first venture into living away from home). This means that the right level of pastoral care from the teaching team needs to be balanced with the academic delivery. The teaching team have to 'front' the programme appropriately,

finding means to enthuse and motivate anxious students while adopting an attitude of being 'care-full'. By its nature, teaching in arts practice places responsibility on students to make subjective decisions and judgements about the content of their research. Ordinarily it is work led by the student that is prioritised in the third year of an undergraduate degree in arts practice, the result of two years of coming to terms with the subject area. During a top-up year, students may have to simultaneously discover a grounding in the area of practice while negotiating their own learning. The personal nature of this kind of (self-)education means that it is critical that staff are careful with, but also care about, the students' first- and last-year experience.

"Coming to Leeds Met was the best decision I have made because it has forced me to be more independent and confident."
(Rebecca Bradley, CPP student, 2008)

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“My mum is a 'constant student'. Growing up I have seen her achieve three degrees, and from all her essays I have seen, I am officially frightened of university assignments, yet I am still tempted to go. Assessments to me mean a lot of reading! I found A-levels were different from GCSEs, as work is not regurgitated to you by a teacher and a lot of research and effort is needed. I feel that at GCSE level you are taught how to pass exams, but with A-levels you have to comprehend the subjects and develop good exam techniques and an excellent work ethos. An alternate reality of my life perhaps? Would life be different if I ate breakfast or not? This would be the perfect assignment for me, because it would allow an analysis of myself.

I think an important skill to have for university would be analytical skills, particularly for my chosen course, Law. Being self-reliant and confident in yourself would also be a big asset. In my opinion, to be able to get the best out of university, I would need to trust myself, to be able to keep to deadlines and even handle the pressures of exams.”

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