A place of my own: reflective, formative spaces for learning teaching and assessment

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CASE STUDY Summary

The 'Place of my own' project showcases innovative practice in the delivery of formative feedback at the University for the Creative Arts. By integrating the student's private feedback area within the university's virtual learning environment (VLE), staff and students can access a 'trail' of feedback - all in one online area. This student-centred place also becomes a deeper space for autonomous learning and continuing dialogue between students and staff, thus creating an 'inside-out' (Higgins, Hartley and Skelton, 2001) approach to assessment feedback, which embraces reflection and criticality.

As a result of this learning and teaching intervention, student satisfaction has greatly increased, there is less dependency on the face to face tutorial and admin time has reduced: this provides students and staff with a far richer model of teaching, learning and assessment.

About the Institution

The University for the Creative Arts (UCA) provides specialist art and design education with strengths in art, design, architecture, media and communication. Formed in 2007 by merging with the Kent Institute of Art & Design (KIAD) and the Surrey Institute of Art and Design, UCA offers courses located at Canterbury, Epsom, Farnham, Maidstone and Rochester. UCA is a Guild HE university.

The Challenge

In the 2011/12 academic year, the NSS scores in assessment and feedback for a number of courses in UCA, were unacceptably low. Students identified dissatisfaction with the feedback mechanism, which they considered to be slow, clumsy, impersonal and often ineffective. From the staff point of view it was felt that the present feedback process was not streamlined and took up a large amount of teaching hours capturing feedback into one single document for student dissemination. This was considered an ineffective use of time and counter productive to the students' developmental process. It was also felt there were 'too many' formative feedback points, which were not necessarily providing the best quality feedback experience for the students. As an alternative, staff felt a more intensive mid unit formative feedback point would better enhance students' learning and development.

Traditionally, art and design courses often score poorly in the area of assessment and feedback. With a dwindling staff resource, course teams struggle to work out how best to enhance formative feedback mechanisms so that students can get the most out of these rich, dialogic experiences. Assessment and feedback literature focuses on the importance of

constructive feedback to 'feed forward' rather than feedback (Higgins, Hartley and Skelton (2001), but this depends on the students' understanding of the feedback given. Course teams spend a lot of time giving feedback to students, but students do not always remember or understand their feedback, which can make feedback tutorials difficult and ineffective. Sessional staff also presented concerns as many arrived 'out of the loop' in terms of the feedback chain and methods, which can result in a disjointed student experience. The inability to easily locate students' formative feedback in one central 'remote' place to monitor progress and development became another driver to find a more effective delivery method. The course team - including professional learning support, also wanted a joined-up online mechanism which employed a dialogic feedback process capturing not only tutor comments but as Nicol (2010) suggests, the student's own reflection and planning forward. This model fosters a dialectical approach, whereby student understandings are articulated and re-worked (Laurillard, 2002). It also lends itself to Bakhtin, through a dialogic approach whereby understandings and knowledge are transformed (Matusov 2007; Wegerif 2008), and also known as transformative feedback.

The Activity

The academic teams interested in enhancing assessment feedback practice got in contact with Maria Tannant, Learning Technologist, explaining their desire to ease the assessment burden and provide richer learning experiences for students in more of a joined up way as described above. As a result of this discourse and clearly identified requirement, an online area was created in the university's Virtual Learning Environment known as myUCA. This space provided each student a private place to access his or her feedback and tutor/student dialogue throughout his or her course of study - normally 3 years. After each formative face-to-face review, staff uploaded their feedback into each student's feedback area, either by comments being placed directly into the designated text area, or uploading a completed formative assessment feedback form.

The underlying technology behind the online feedback area is a modified journal tool from Campus Pack which integrates with Blackboard, the university's virtual learning environment. The technology allows each course to easily create their own online Feedback area with the help of a template they can adapt to meet the course's needs and operational procedures. During the pilot phase, academics were uploading the feedback to the students' spaces but once the project became established and cascaded across other courses, campus registry admin became responsible for uploading the feedback - thus freeing up more academic teaching time.

The transparency of having feedback in one central location aids the team in understanding the diverse developmental needs of each student. The team, made up of course tutors and professional **support** tutors have the ability to read and feed-in to this dialogic feedback space. In turn, students are encouraged to engage with this feedback by writing and reflecting their own responses. This 3-way feedback dynamic makes the entire supporting process holistic from an institutional perspective and directly addresses issues of poor retention. The student response not only provides a form of experiential learning through process and reflection but also provides an early warning mechanism that feedback might not have been understood and their work is moving along the wrong path. In such cases, tutors can pick up on these points and set those students back on the right track.

The Outcomes

The Fashion course that piloted this approach saw the NSS assessment and feedback score jump from 56% to 82%. However, students' perceptions around course organisation and management are certainly an interdependent factor when building a feedback mechanism.

The academic enhancement team discovered four perceived benefits to the 'Place of my own ' project detailed below.

	student	tutors & PS*	university
centralised, efficient & holistic	remote 24/7 access repository for all feedback quicker feedback avoids conflicting feedback	fast, efficient & direct recording mechanism remote & centralised aide memoire provides name to face on-track intervention	remote 27/7 access cost effective mechanism evidence repository performance monitoring
dialogic approach	2/3 way discourse dialogic transformative inclusive Tutor/LDT/LTL/SpLD	open & transparent joined up approach learn from peers monitor standards evidence practice	meets benchmarks addresses retention
reflective & transformative	self-reflective constructive analytical problem-solving transformative	staff reflect and learn from other tutor's feedback community of practice fosters situated learning transforms practice	identifies with student's expectations in both assessment delivery and the use of technology
fosters creativity	developmental experimental harness ideas enhances innovation	staff start to think of more innovative ways of delivering formative feedback.	pushes existing boundaries in assessment process and the use of technology

Professional support includes academic support with language/writing/study/learning skills as well as Disability & Specific Learning Difficulties support tutors.

The feedback space has certainly helped give the course a new confidence to push technology into new directions. The space also provides a benchmark for new staff that might not be so experienced in giving feedback, enabling them to learn from peers and also be mentored by the course leader.

Post-pilot student feedback revealed the project had been a huge success. It identified the need for the feedback to be uploaded in a timely manner and for feedback to be constructive and feed-forward - not retrospective. Students felt the 2-way dialogue needed to be a mandatory requirement otherwise only very few would bother.

> "The learning journeys helped me keep track of my feedback and how I was improving over the units. I think being able to set your own goals and highlighting the main points of improvement is a good idea and would help more"
>
> <div align="right">student comment</div>

> "It's a great way of seeing the student's learning profile over a year, it's going to be of even more value now we are moving into the second year of the project as we can start to pick up on comments from the previous year."
>
> <div align="right">comment from course leader</div>

> "A simple cost effective system allowing students easy access to their present/past feedback and saves a vast amount of photocopying, paper and time. Uploading the feedback sheets to the area is extremely easy and a great improvement on the old printed method which was distributed via pigeonholes during term-time or posted during summer."
>
> <div align="right">comment from Campus Registry Admin</div>

Learner Perceptions

One of the real benefits was to students, with many starting to develop a much more confident voice and clearly beginning to see assessment feedback as more of an 'inside-out' process:

> "Firstly, I can't believe I over ran(!), I did panic and admittedly more practise should have gone into it. I am aware due to going backwards and forwards, with ideas, in the beginning of this project that I had wasted time, but I now feel that I'm back on track and have sufficient work. Since the review I have completed more primary research in the form of interviews, talking to the public in the Covent Garden area and analysing which designers I will choose for the project. I am also currently working with an architect who will draw up my ideas of the store in the form of floor-plans, so I'm eager to see how they will turn out. The next few weeks will be very busy but I'm glad that the ball is rolling and I finally feel like I'm progressing! "
>
> <div align="right">2nd year Fashion Management student, 2014</div>

Lessons Learned

The UCA project has opened up some other aspects of assessment feedback practice not been considered before. One key element is the ways in which assessment and feedback (as terms in their own right), are explained to students, and how this has an impact on the ISS/NSS. If students are not 'enculturated' to the ways in which feedback occurs, they will not understand their role in it and it will not be a 'two-way dialogue'.

"We want a joined up system for feedback and assessment. We need to investigate this further and for us this is a starting point for improving our communication system on assessment. If you ask a student what they want to know, what's the most important thing to them in their learning, it's about feedback and if you look at some of the questions in the IIS and NSS… Do you get your feedback quickly? Do you respond to your feedback? Do you get enough feedback? Students might well be saying no to these questions, as they don't always understand what feedback is about. So when we have a tutorial we need to clearly explain what is feedback and it is their responsibility to learn from this feedback."

<div align="right">Course Leader, BA (Hons) Fashion Promotion, Rochester</div>

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