

# Hearing the student voice

## Involving students in curriculum design and development



An ESCalate-funded project involving Edinburgh Napier University, Leeds Metropolitan University, Birmingham City University and the University of Westminster

### Case study

#### Title

Using a “Think Tank” to hear Students’ Voices in an Art and Design module

#### Institution

University of Westminster

#### Background

This case study was initiated as part of the *Incurriculum* project, an NTFS Fellowship project, run in conjunction with Norwich University College of the Arts and the University of Bedfordshire, which aims to analyse the factors which enable students with Specific Learning difficulties (dyslexia, dyspraxia etc.) to be successful in Higher education when studying art and design and to examine how these approaches (and in particular attributes of assessment) could be transferred to other subjects. An analysis of the factors that supported the learning so such students was undertaken by a detailed examination of learning on art and design modules in the three institutions. This work within the University of Westminster incorporated hearing the students’ voice into the project and it has generously been offered as a contribution to the Student Voice project. The details of the *Incurriculum* project can be found at [www.incurriculum.org.uk/](http://www.incurriculum.org.uk/)

#### The challenge

What were the issues that lead to involving students?  
Why was it decided to employ the student voice?

The University’s Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy promotes student-centred, active learning, and we are aware that this should involve the use of student views on the design and delivery of the curriculum. As part of the InCurriculum project two modules in Art and Design were being examined in terms of determining what students with dyslexia found supportive in the teaching and learning activities they experienced. This led to the approach used in this case study of asking students to comment on their experiences through sessions inbuilt into the module. This had the advantage of being embedded into the learning so demanding no additional time

from the students and also to ensure a direct emphasis on the module itself; we were aware that much feedback from the students is generic, relating to their courses and their experiences as a whole and not a specific module.

### **Solution**

Describe in some detail how the students were involved...  
How were students recruited?  
In what way is the student voice employed?

Two separate modules “Preparation for Dissertation “ (level 5) and “Dissertation” (level 6) of the BA Graphic Information Design” were utilised in this study, the facilitator, a member of the Art and Design staff, was the Module Leader for one module and a member of the module team for the other. At three points during the delivery of the two separate modules the students were divided into small groups (3 groups in all) where activities were designed to align with key points of assessment, to help the students understand what they were addressing in the work, and to feedback to the module lecturers their views on the content and delivery of the curriculum; these sessions were labelled “Think tanks”.

Particular issues they were guided to were their strategies for approaching assessment, their processes of learning, how they helped each other, how they understood the assessment criteria. Each of the sessions was 45 minutes long, and the facilitator sat in, to guide them if necessary to keep to the topic, and primarily to listen. The work started with all the students participating in a learning styles questionnaire, to get them thinking about learning, and then they addressed issues of delivery and assessment and their role in this. This was part of their normal taught time in the studio.

The facilitator supported these discussions and took notes on the salient features of the discussions. During these sessions students made comments indicating what they found helpful, or less so, in terms of teaching, eg “We need more feedback on our oral presentations”, it was also evident that the students clearly expected feedback on their comments; it was easy to provide this directly by oral feedback in a subsequent class. The outcomes were sufficiently valuable that the process was repeated in the following year.

### **Results**

What have the results been?  
What is the evidence, if any, for the benefits?  
In what ways, if any, did employing the student voice make a difference?

The students participated in the discussion within the module and made useful observations, which the module leader/facilitator was able to act on directly. It was evident that the students had useful and intelligent things to say and that in these sessions it was possible to enter into a real dialogue with the students, for example about what feedback on their assessments they would find most useful. It was evident that students did see this process as an embedded part of the teaching on the modules, rather than as a separate activity to elicit feedback from them.

Other outcomes of this work were:

A better understanding by the Module Leader of the students' motivation to study.

In particular the Module Leader gained a better understanding of the students' perceptions of the assessment processes and their understanding of the assessment criteria

That it was evident that there were marked differences between the staff and students' understanding of the assessment criteria

An insight (as this was undertaken in two consecutive years) that this was an excellent way of meeting the different needs of different cohorts, with the possibility of immediate feedback on their comments

The view that the "think tank" processes could be delivered effectively at the course level rather than concentrating it on a single module. In this way it would be beneficial as it would involve more staff, but would not have the immediacy of being a direct part of the module delivery

The view the students were less inhibited in talking freely to the lecturer facilitating the sessions (who did this on both modules) when she was not the Module Leader, it appeared that they felt less able to be critical when in the module where she was the Module Leader

An insight (as this was undertaken in two consecutive years) that this was an excellent way of meeting the different needs of different cohorts, with the possibility of immediate feedback on their comments

The possibility that the approach might also have an impact on supporting student socialisation within the HE context and help them to learn to use their "Voice" effectively and to see this as part of their education

### **Learning points**

What were the key points for success?

What were the things you would do differently if starting again?

What were/are the main risks?

The approach was clearly successful in that in the discussion of the learning and assessment in the module within the teaching time the students not only gained a better understanding of their own learning and approaches to assessment but also provided the facilitator with the authentic "student voice". It is essential that the discussions (which were student led) are established in such a way that the students perceive them as helpful and relevant to their learning.

The facilitator was aware that of the value of the comments to her when heard directly from the student discussion, but when reporting to the other Module Leader, who was not present at the think tanks, it was more onerous to adequately translate

the richness of the students' comments. Hence by the time the comments have been transferred to other staff teaching on the module they are somewhat "diluted" - in future it might be useful to capture key words and phrases and the use "word cloud" software to express these, or this could be met by using a tape recorder, but then resources would be required for the transcription.

The main risk was that the students would be inhibited in discussion given the presence of the facilitator, using a member of staff in whom the students had a high level of trust in was a key element of this work. This could have been met by using an independent facilitator but then some of the immediate learning insights for the students might have been lost, and this would dilute the sense that this was an embedded part of the module. There was also a risk that the sessions could drift into a "complaints" session rather than being with constructive comments and positive suggestions.

This was undertaken with two practically based Art and Design modules with small student numbers; it would have been much more difficult to achieve in a large module.

As the project ran over two years students who participated in the second year, had been exposed to it previously in the other module. These students were not so forthcoming at this second "exposure", this might have been due to the novelty having worn off, or it might have been anxiety about their project (a triple module) and hence looking for more direction from the staff to "get it right".

### **Resources**

What resources did the development take in terms of time, money, goodwill and human resources?

The resources required to undertake this approach were very low and consisted of a small amount of time of the staff facilitator in designing the sessions.

### **Support implications**

What are the 'support implications' in terms of the resources required for continued student involvement?

This approach can be continued with minimum support and is adaptable to a far wider range of modules.

### **Further information**

Is there any further information you would like to provide?

### **Useful literature/ weblinks**

Are there any publications in the literature relevant to this development that you would recommend?

Are there any publications describing this development?

Are there any relevant weblinks to follow up?

Details of the InCurriculum project can be found at the website

[www.incurriculum.org.uk/](http://www.incurriculum.org.uk/)

### **Contact**

Contact name and details...

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