

Artwork Critical Friend Review

Introduction

This critical friend review was commissioned after an exploratory meeting between the author and members of the Artwork team at Bath Spa University in April 2007. Its purpose is to present a preliminary 'mapping' of perceptions of and connections between some of the aspects of the project that are important to contemporary teaching and learning in higher education. These include: experiential learning, pedagogy, curriculum development, creative practice (within both higher education and the wider professional community), high specification learning technologies, communities of practice and knowledge transactions. This list of 'project descriptors' was derived by the author from his reading of the project website and documentation. It represents a subjective view of key elements of the 'public face' of the project. It is not intended to be a comprehensive list, more to provide a framework to conduct the interviews.

The review

The review involved interviewing project staff, academics, Student Fellows and other stakeholders. Interviews were audio recorded and summaries made from the recordings. A grounded theory approach was adopted in summarising so that texts are constructed around actual words used in the interviews but without producing verbatim transcripts. Summaries were compared, similarities and differences noted, and emergent issues were derived. Interviews were undertaken with the following people on Monday 14th and Tuesday 15th May in the order in which they are listed:

- Dr. Mimi Thebo, Senior Teaching Fellow, and Dr. Steve May, Head of Department of Creative Studies
- Professor Geoff Smith, Head of School of Music and Performing Arts
- Professor Neil Sammells, Dean of Academic Development & Artwork Director, and Adam Powell, Artwork Manager
- Professor Ron George, Head of Bath School of Art & Design, and Kerry Curtis, Senior Teaching Fellow
- Professor Martin Rieser, Senior Teaching Fellow and Julie Depledge, Head of Department of Graphic Design & Digital Imaging
- Susan Cherrett, Business Support Manager
- Artwork Student Fellows: Lydia Frater, Jon Hickley and Jacky Puzey
- Nicholas Sargent, Senior Teaching Fellow, and Joe Bennett, Head of Department of Music
- Professor Tim Middleton, Head of School of English and Creative Studies
- Chrissie Harrington, Senior Teaching Fellow
- Amanda Leon, Head of Student Support Services
- Antonia Walker, Artwork Educational Researcher and Developer, and Professor Paul Hyland, Advisor on Educational Research and Development
- Dr. Tracey Hill, Head of Department of English Literature

All interviews followed the same format. Respondents were asked to

- Briefly describe their role
- Give three words that describe the project now
- In terms of their own involvement within the project, explain where they place emphasis from the list of key descriptors (experiential learning, pedagogy, curriculum development, creative practice in higher education & the

professional community, high specification learning technologies, communities of practice, and knowledge transactions) and explain the:

- connections they see between them
- networks involved
- collaborative work involved
- use of technology
- interplay between higher education and professional practice
- opportunities for curriculum development
- Explain what they see as the greatest opportunity
- Explain what they see as the greatest challenge

Outcomes

Summaries of the interviews are appended.

Keywords

A wide range of words (31 in total) are associated with the project, almost all of them with positive connotations. The most frequently used are: technology, creativity, employability, professionalism, and exciting.

Emphasis

The greatest emphasis is placed on the role of high specification learning technologies and creative/communities of practice followed by experiential learning and curriculum development. Several respondents emphasised the interconnections between these and other project descriptors.

Technology

It is widely recognised that the technology enables the university to operate at a professional level commensurate with industry and that this enhances the student experience. Different subjects utilise technology in different ways. Many specific examples are given including developments in expressing ideas, writing scripts, capturing unplanned outcomes, networking, representing experience, and performance. Challenges related to the technology include keeping up with technical developments and how the curriculum might respond to the possibilities offered.

Connections

Whereas Artwork demonstrates connectedness in the major issues with which this review is concerned, it also of raises a number of boundary issues, e.g. professional practice/practice in higher education, work within disciplines/work between disciplines, teaching-centred pedagogies/learning-centred pedagogies/employment-centred pedagogies. Some respondents have strong views about these matters. Whereas a unified institutional position (a 'party line') is neither possible nor desirable, institutional structures that facilitate debate and discussion are a necessary precursor to curriculum development.

Networks, collaboration and the interface between higher education and professional practice

The review suggests that the most challenging boundary issue is the interface between higher education and professional practice and the associated roles of networks and mechanisms for collaboration. The involvement of industrial partners is seen as a major stimulus for curriculum development, not just in terms of what they have to offer, but also in recognising that they may not be familiar with or sympathetic to the processes and protocols of higher education. It is thus difficult to generalise about partnership and collaboration, and the involvement of industrial partners might

be better seen as operating along a shifting continuum of different models of engagement. The institutional challenge is in managing this fluid and changing mix.

Alumni and local small business networks are regarded as important, especially where they overlap. Several respondents favoured working with industrial partners who employ alumni, with the alumni coming back into the university and/or mentoring the students and helping them get into the workplace and the networks. These are ways of bridging incrementally the gap between university and work, so that a gradual movement into the work place is feasible. There may be intermediary roles for Student Fellows in such a model.

In addition to external networks and forms of collaboration, the importance of internal collaboration was emphasised. Artswork is promoting new dialogues, and an 'Artswork ethos' is developing but the extent to which it is contributing to a cross-disciplinary community across the university is unclear.

Teaching, learning and curriculum development

Whereas there is a strong 'internal' dimension to teaching, learning and curriculum development, they are also related to the professional practice matters raised in the preceding section. Again, there is a fluid, continuum of relationships.

The 'student culture' is changing: students are operating as proto-professionals and performers in their own education; their expertise may be regarded as a curriculum resource. Each community/discipline has specific ways of doing things through which its members derive their identity. Students' identities may be focused on their disciplines, and/or their career aspirations, the professional communities that they aspire to be a part of. An argument can thus be made that teaching and pedagogical practice should reflect a better understanding of the employment aspirations of students, including entrepreneurial learning so that they are better prepared for self-employment. Moreover, students may move into areas that take them a long way from their subjects; they may work outside conventional subject boundaries. Subject staff are necessarily concerned with maintaining the integrity of their disciplines. A further twist to this argument is that few of the students will go on to work 'in the subject' as such.

Some new modules have been developed that address the matters outlined above. These modules explore new curricula territory and different modes of delivery. But in fluid educational and employment environments, there are major challenges: How does the curriculum responds to emergent possibilities? How does it accommodate different styles of curriculum management? How might the curriculum be enhanced without continually enlarging it? More radically, what would a university look like built around networks rather than disciplines?

Opportunities and challenges

Whereas real developmental gains are evident through Artswork, continued success will depend on flexibility in university structures. As the university increasingly embraces industry there is a tension between its academic structures and identity and the structures and identity it needs to adopt to operate successfully in the business world. The respective structures and identities are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but the tension between them does foreground issues of institutional identity and the image the university presents to all its stakeholders. Several student companies are being developed raising related issues about the balance between the autonomy of the individual groups concerned and the coherence of the brand at university level. What is the brand? At what level is it operating and through what mechanisms is it accountable? What significant assets are being produced?

An innovative project like Artswork raises expectations of constant incremental improvement. This is difficult to sustain. As one respondent put it: "Having to top what you did last time. It gets harder the better we get." Keeping up with the technology is a financial as well as a practical challenge. A further challenge is in engaging stakeholders in reflective research and its reporting (see Pedagogic Research and Scholarship Strategy Document 28.08.06). The term 'stakeholder' is used deliberately: research in its many manifestations can be undertaken by students and creative practitioners as well as academics although academics may take a lead in directing it. Reporting project outcomes in a variety of formats and in a variety of outlets is likely to be a key part of establishing and maintaining Artswork as a major development in the arts and arts education.

Directions for further work

This review demonstrates the value of having a critical friend who is external to the project. Ways in which this role might be developed include:

- i. Extending the preliminary mapping to include Students Fellows (there was inadequate time to talk with them in the current round of interviews, and they had important perspectives to offer), undergraduate students, and creative practitioners. The same interview questions would be used.
- ii. Extending the mapping by building on the outcomes reported here. This would involve conducting further interviews with the individuals interviewed earlier, having a more detailed discussion with them about the issues raised.
- iii. Extending the mapping by building on identified themes, for example the state of inter- and multidisciplinary work within the project and its potential for development. This would include: an overview of what each contributing discipline offers; some assessment of the opportunities and challenges of moving ideas and practices into a cross-disciplinary space; and some recommendations about developing a 'pedagogy of connection' that utilises contexts and tools arising from some the unique features of the project. Other themes might be identified with project personnel.
- iv. Linking with the longitudinal research currently underway to gain an understanding of how personal histories, academic performance, career trajectories and collaborative networks may be better aligned.
- v. Working with project personnel, Senior Teaching Fellows, associated academics and possibly Student Fellows and creative practitioners in writing up their experiences as chapters for a book which address the interface between higher education and creative practice through Artswork. This would involve: (i) working initially for a day with each individual, using the interview transcript as a basis for mapping out a chapter; (ii) working with each individual for a second day when the chapter is in draft, editing and refining to ensure that it is coherent within the publication as a whole; (iii) working with project personnel in editing the final work, writing an introductory chapter, and taking the book through to publication. The book could be seen as a way of placing the project strategically relative to wider academic and practitioner communities. Other strategic possibilities could be discussed with project personnel.

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