

CRITICAL STUDIES ARE DEAD, LONG LIVE CRITICAL STUDIES

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ABSTRACT

The value of a broad awareness of the world through critical studies is well documented and a cornerstone of undergraduate education. Within Product Design this is particularly pertinent as anything which is produced in the real world is automatically analysed and evaluated from current, future and historical perspectives. It is an iterative and continually evolving process. Without an awareness of these contexts designers are in danger of making assumptions and therefore risk the potential of getting it wrong or allowing the user to misinterpret the intended design value. A developed sense of critical awareness and contextual placement to support design decisions is one aspect of the complex domain that is design. A question arises over the teaching of critical studies; has it been subjected by current pressures to excessive standardisation and conformity? Delivery within a lecture context and assessment in the essay format seem to be the most prevalent form of student response within an undergraduate curriculum. At the University of Hertfordshire (UH) we have attempted to create a diverse middle ground. The authors apply a variety of approaches from the traditional lecture based learning environment, to embedding within practical studio tasks and out of studio visits and experiences. The project outlined below, one of several innovative approaches, comprises the introduction of knowledge, evaluation and analysis of artefacts and the synthesis of these supported student projects. Working with St Albans Museum the project, displaying the culture of the museum's collection in a non-museum context, demands the application of critical skills and creative responses. Importantly the deliverables for the project are tangible, supported by a reflective document, which is a creative challenge. Key to this is allowing the students to define their own contexts and the parameters of the project. The project has opened up new perspectives on research, assessment and collaboration in design education and a new paradigm for critical studies in the curriculum.

Keywords: Student engagement, Critical Studies, Collaboration

1 INTRODUCTION

The teaching of design is a combination of knowledge, purpose and application. Integral to this is a contextualising aspect where students learn about the broader positioning of design including, for example, the evolution of design movements and relevant theoretical approaches to objects and visual culture. Teaching any subject at degree level is a multi-faceted activity, this complexity is compounded by two fundamental differences within creative arts.

1. Firstly, there is a balance between training for a vocation and studying the subject in an academic institution. Both should include the value of design to culture, economies, ecology and self-enlightenment. We are training to 'do' as well as 'articulate' the subject.
2. Secondly, the teaching of the disciplines from the Art College tradition, which can be traced back to the 1920s German Bauhaus. This approach to education is very much an empirical pedagogy using the workshop and the studio as environments for learning [1].

Although easily taught and assessed in a lecture and essay format, this is an unsatisfactory learning experience for many of these profoundly practical students [2]; some find it difficult to make the connection to what happens in the studio where they are exploring their own discipline specific creativity [3].

This paper describes a collaboration between the Creative Design programme at UH and St Albans Museum. The project, described below, explores ways of better engaging design students in the academic strand of the course. One approach is to find fresh ways of addressing theoretical aspects of study by taking the work out of the lecture room and exploring the same concepts through practical activity, which utilise the analytical processes taught in the classroom. Intrinsicly linked to this approach is the perceived need to engage all students in a reflective process of design in which theoretical, social, cultural and historical aspects are embedded in studio practice (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Relationship between Cultural Studies and Design Practice

The project demonstrates two key strategies to provide meaning and promote student engagement:

1. Exploring alternatives to the traditional essay as a form of assessment.
2. The integration of studio practice and academic modules to provide a seamless experience of practical, creative, contextual and intellectual learning for the students.

This paper outlines an approach that takes the learning environment away from the formal lecture theatre and uses a project with a practical challenge within Critical Studies as a case study to illustrate how these principles work in practice.

2 THE RESEARCH QUESTION

The scope of the project had defined parameters and a controlled focus even if the research questions were ambitious. Simply put, the authors were exploring the following questions:

1. Could different approaches to Critical Studies engage and motivate practical students?
2. Could the deliverable outcomes from a traditionally essay-led course be different but still relevant?
3. Could the connection between Critical Studies and Studio Practice be improved in the students work?

3 THE PROJECT



Figure 2. The Project Structure; Reframing the Assessment Task

The project was set as the core (25%) assessment assignment for Semester B of a one year module in the second year of a three year degree programme. As such, it referred to and expected students to

utilise the knowledge, skills and processes explored throughout the module and building on work in the first year (Figure 2).

3.1 The Project

The case study below was conducted with 48 second year students. The project was named *The Us in Museum* by the students early in the process, an apt and witty name that proved popular with all concerned. It also reflects the extent of their engagement and implies their total immersion in and identification with the task. The case study below was the most recent iteration of a three year relationship with the Museum. Over time this has built on the confidence within both parties and is consequently increasingly ambitious in its scope.

The aims were to:

- Combine analysis of historic artefacts for Creative Design students within a current studio project and a Critical Studies assignment.
- Cultivate a respect for and rapport with heritage artefacts.
- Encourage students to integrate their understanding of the products into a literature review and analysis.
- Broaden the evaluation criteria to include a wider spectrum of cultural change and social perspectives.
- Enable the Museum collection to be used outside the museum whilst closed for re-location.
- Facilitate team working and collaboration with external stakeholders (St Albans Museum).

3.2 The Brief

Students in groups (four to six students) selected an object from the Museum's collection from the website and created a display away from the Museum in a public place. The displays utilised six 2 metre tall glass display cabinets in a public corridor in the School of Creative Arts.

The objects selected had to be man-made artefacts. The students were given constraints of fragility, rarity and value for the objects. The groups had to create a narrative of their own choice to give the artefact a context and then design and execute the display to communicate these ideas to the viewer and engage museum audiences in new ways. The need to produce a thematic and visual narrative to educate and engage a casual observer was emphasised. Themes and contexts were drawn from the Critical Studies module.

3.3 Introductory Workshop

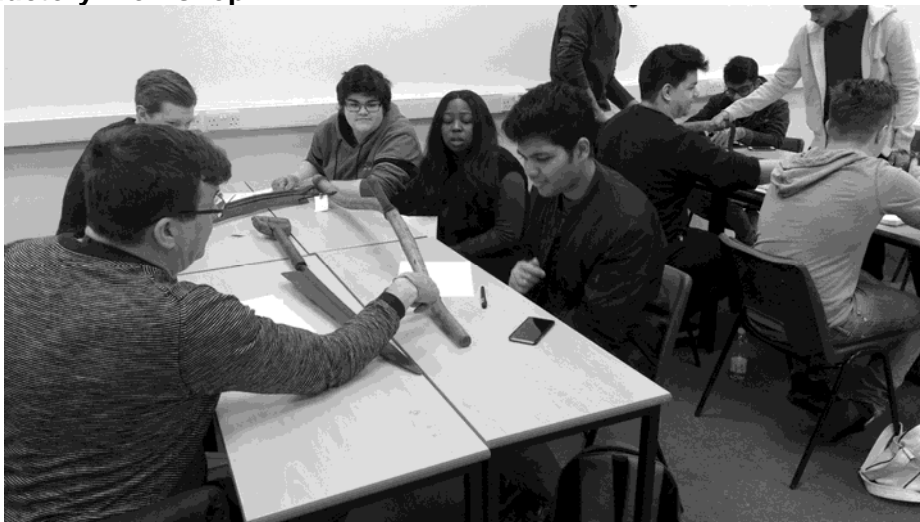


Figure 3. Handling workshop

As a prelude to the project the students visited the Design Museum, London [4] to explore current exhibition trends and methods of display, communication and focus. Some of the student cohort had also previously visited the Museum der Dinge, Berlin [5] and a lecture was given about this Museum's approach to exploring contemporary culture told through object associations in displays [6].

The project was initiated by a handling workshop. Within this curator led session, groups handled and analysed their selected object (Figure 3). They identified connections to a current artefact or issue and to a theoretical framework such as, for example, cultural connotations, use, lifestyle, sustainability, manufacture, design status or emotional design.

4 OUTCOMES AND ASSESSMENT

4.1 Submission/Assessment Requirements

The assessment of the project was a combination of group and individual submissions based around the display itself:

- Each group should produce a display exploring the relationship between the heritage artefact and a current product, theme or issue.
- Each group should write a 300-400 word rationale to explain their aims and objectives.
- Each student should write an individual 750-1000 word literature review linked to the display research including a high quality bibliography.



Figure 4. The Displays

The nine finished displays were assessed by a team of tutors and curators from the Museum and by peer assessment in project groups. The six best outcomes were chosen for public exhibition during Degree Show Week (Figure 4). *The Us in Museum* was marked as a group project, with individual mark variations based on the anonymous peer assessments and the individual Literature Review.

4.2 Student and Tutor Reflections

- Feedback was collected through the standard UH Module Feedback Questionnaire and the self-assessment form submitted with the assignment's digital submission, both routinely completed by all students.
- The project engaged the students totally and they were almost unanimously positive in their feedback, which mainly expressed an appreciation of a traditionally theory and text-based module, with which many of them struggle, revamped as a practical activity [5]. Attendance and commitment were high, and enthusiasm for the task was almost unprecedented.
- Many of them also found the associated literature review easier having devised the theoretical theme for the display [8]. *'The exhibit part of this module I very much enjoyed and it played in nicely with my lit review.'* (student feedback questionnaire, 2017) This was a second year group who were to undertake their degree essay on their return in October 2017 and mostly professed themselves more confident.

- The students were hugely (and justly) proud of their displays (Figure 4). The level of enthusiasm was unparalleled in Critical Studies outcomes; the pace of activity and the febrile atmosphere on the day of the display setup were extraordinary.
- On the negative side, a small minority of students were less engaged and gained some success as freeloaders depending on others in their group to do the work. This was exacerbated by the reluctance of their fellow students to ‘name and shame’ in peer assessments.

4.3 Mapping Learning Outcomes

One objective of the project was to change student’s perceptions of academic study within a practical curriculum. Table 1 below maps traditional outcomes and research methodology against those introduced as part of the project. The authors were attempting to shift research responses from the traditional written text approach to a more visual investigation. To successfully achieve a display, each team had to engage the following cognitive activities: knowledge, evaluation, analysis and synthesis. These processes map well on to traditional research as well as design methodology taught as part of the professional design practice studio projects [9].

Table 1. A comparison between a traditional academic curriculum and activities within the project

Traditional Academic Research and Outcomes	Interpreted within the Us in Museum project
Research using academic texts	Research through visits and hands-on activity
Exploration of theoretical frameworks through reading and listening	Identification of key themes and narratives through group discussion, making and visits
Object analysis using images and critical review	Hands-on analysis of artefacts
Written communication of ideas and concepts	Visual display enhanced by design process and practice
Individual publishing of research	Teamwork and collaboration with external institution
Separation of academic and practical worlds	Practical and intellectual crossover with studio projects
Accessible by confident readers and writers	Accessible by all

5 CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORK

5.1 Conclusion

The project set out with clear objectives to engage practical designers with Critical Studies. Our results, through the quality of the displays and supporting work, show that when given a practical challenge enthusiasm and excitement become part of the response. After the initial handling workshops each team took responsibility for the project with less than expected intervention from staff.

“I really like the setup of this semester with the museum object, pop up and then the essays. This made it more exciting and not as boring and longwinded.” (Student feedback questionnaire, 2017). Whether this translates to deeper learning can be seen in the engagement of students in the associated tasks such as the literature review. *“I found the writing of both parts [Literature Review and Analysis] very enjoyable and enjoyed the research and discovery even more.”* (student feedback questionnaire, 2017) It is also worthy of note that the project has had a positive response from the Museum collaborator.

‘The better outcomes showed some understanding of deeper implications: ‘Layers of information [are] immediately attractive but detail is there if you want more.’ (Sarah Keeling, curator, St Albans Museum).

The value of curating has had a direct impact not only with students’ engagement with Critical Studies but in articulating contexts and research within their studio challenges. It was the intention of the

authors that a deeper sense of interrogating an object as an abstract exercise could be translated into valuable development tools within the design studio. Although anecdotal at this stage, the students who undertook the project are now in the final year and the depth of initial research and the articulation of this appears stronger than in previous years. We await the 2018 results of the degree essays and level 6 studio projects to assess the impact of The Us in Museum on the quality of the work.

Essentially the three research questions have been answered positively, and form the foundation for further work on the relationship between the academic and practical aspect of the Design Programmes.

5.2 Future

The collaboration and project have both continued into the current academic year and have become synonymous with the Creative Design programme. From a logistical perspective the choice of objects has been limited due to access to objects in storage. As group assessments and ‘free loading’ students were raised as concerns (similar to all group projects) an individual rationale for the displays was required at the start of the project to ensure all team members engaged.

A successful aim of the project was to expand students’ comfort zones and develop their understanding of their own discipline, enabling them to reflect on theoretical elements of the course through practical hands-on activity, using social and cultural research and Experiential Learning Theory [10]. Building on the success of the project the notion of curatorship (applying critical tools), the value and impact of an object beyond traditional criteria such as function have been expanded. Students are now encouraged to apply the same tools and questions when developing their own studio work.

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