Levelling the Playing Field: A Case Study on the Benefits of Integrating Student Feedback Through Fluid Course Development

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Abstract
A challenge in teaching and course planning is striking the balance between the skills and knowledge students need to learn and the timeliness of the information available to explore and learn from. In visual arts, students who are hoping to pursue professional practice need legal knowledge, communication skills, and technical skills alongside reflective thinking and time management. But various mediums and disciplines complicate and constrain the process of course development. This presentation explores a case study of documenting fluid course development through integrated feedback to address these complications and teaching in interdisciplinary space. The course to be discussed is a Visual Arts Business Procedures as I taught it at a technical college in a semi-rural area of South Carolina, with teaching methods covering digital and face-to-face praxis. Successful approaches to be discussed include ways of centering student voices, use of engagement to improve depth of learning, knowledge co-production as a learning process, and creating community across semesters. The discussions and provisional conclusions include how to implement these approaches in low resource settings, while ensuring they met accreditation and assessment standards.

Keywords: Equity, Course Development, Student Engagement

Introduction

This case study discusses a course that I redeveloped and taught at Greenville Technical College in the United States over several semesters, starting in Summer 2019 until Fall 2020. As part of the Visual Arts programme, the Visual Arts Business Procedures course prepares students for professional careers as artists.

Over the length of the semester, students start by learning legal knowledge related to business, including the basics of copyright law, contract law, and various business structures before moving into developing and branding their own business. Research blog posts help to explore the information in these earlier assignments to help guide students through the materials, while being able to learn from what information their peers share, to form the habit of working on projects in stages.

Alongside these units, weekly discussion boards provide hypothetical situations requiring students to consider ethical questions that will shape the structure and mission of their businesses. Approximately halfway through the semester, the discussion boards transitioned into reflective journal entries. The topics of the journal provide private spaces to contemplate the relevance of the information learned with the ability for feedback and questions to be left for the instructor to answer as they arise.

Asynchronous lectures paired with synchronous activities help to make sure that the online components of the course make the best use of the allotted contact hours. Attendance for the course is based on the departmental requirement of 90% attendance to maintain enrolment, gauged through a minimum of 75% of assignments completed on time to allow for many of the students having to support families and jobs while completing their degrees at Greenville Technical College.

Shorter assessments, along with the discussion boards, blog posts, and journals across the term, receive feedback and recommendations, with the final assessment being an amalgamation of the earlier assignments with further depth and the marking feedback incorporated.

Pedagogy and Positionality

Starting with positionality and pedagogical approach, the decisions discussed here were led by an intersectional, feminist approach that recognises that educational policies and static teaching plans can often disadvantage students. In order to address these institutional barriers, it is important to strike a balance that improves access while supporting student-led and student-centred capacity building in higher education. While pragmatic, there is some contextualising of the choices made within the literature to support a wider implementation of the approaches taken.

The Problems

In redeveloping the course, there were several concerns that arose. As one of the two courses where students from multiple disciplines come together, its redevelopment presents a unique number of challenges in order to support each diverse cohort. The main issue was the only space for students to make recommendations was at the end of the semester. An additional point was flagged when the programme was made aware that there were concerns about the

post-graduation employment rate. Through the redevelopment process, the changes to the course benefitting students could also help to address this issue as an extended means of supporting students in their careers.

Student Evaluations

Challenge 1—Implementation Delay

Typical procedure in evaluating courses have students check in at the end of the semester. While these evaluations provide valuable data, clarifying whether students feel like the instructor is present and familiar with the information that is being taught. While these are valuable traits to have as an instructor, the evaluations fall short in asking students what more they would want from the course. What results is student voices being heard at a stage that makes it too late for them to influence the course that they are enrolled in. Students only being able to voice their opinions at the end of a semester makes the feedback that they offer beneficial only to the next cohort, which will have a set of unique individuals whose needs might not be met in the why they need to be because of the delayed implementation of feedback.

Challenge 2—Benefit to Student

In order to ensure that students can benefit from their input in course development, there needs to space for students to communicate their needs through the semester rather than at the end of the term. While this might be common sense in some pedagogical approaches, it not always that case that teaching staff is aware of the value that student communications can bring to course development and implementation. What is necessary is a way to ensure that students can directly benefit from the feedback that they provide to ensure that they are learning materials that apply to the course while being relevant to their long-term career goals.

Challenge 3—Engagement

While teaching earlier iterations of this course and others, there are certain elements that are necessary to improve student engagement. Often, a course can seem like a mound of information that is being presented, causing anxiety around being able to access and internalise enough information as a student within the short timeframe of an academic term. Theoretically, the adjustments to improve the student feedback loop in a way that enables students to benefit from their feedback should improve the connection to the course materials and thus improve student engagement.

Student Evaluation Solutions

Primary changes to the course that resolved the stated challenges include a trio of activities that take place across the course. A discussion boards and journal activities supplemented by an extra credit question at the end of the final exam, the latter providing the data necessary for the start of the next term.

The original course assigned readings included short essays from artists who reflected on their careers. While informative, these essays did not provide the details necessary for students to build their own career plans. Rather than read through the reflections of other

artists, the assignment was adjusted for the students to reflect on their own experiences and how they would implement them for their own careers.

Questions serve as prompts for the journals, guiding the students through what was and was not relevant to them (Moss & Murray, 2005), help to personalise the learning experience. Personalisation is created through establishing a dialogue with the students through the journal. This partnered approach to learning is beneficial to both students and teacher (Netcoh, 2017). These reflections and personalisation help to bridge the student and the materials in a way that facilitates better engagement by the students, particularly with the welcome session that will be discussed shortly.

Another element of the conversation extends from the final journal assignment into the final exam. Through these assessments, students are asked to answer two questions. The first question being, "what would change about the course?" and the second question asking "what advice would you give students just starting the course?". With both these questions, it is possible to understand more about the student's experiences, while also providing data to use with the next cohort.

Larger charges are usually requested by students at the end of the term, while advice for future students ties each of the semesters together. At the start of each term, with the course being given primarily online, a welcome session is hosted to give students an overview of the course materials. During this live session, the information shared at the end of the previous term is shared with incoming students to help them understand what other students felt to be valuable knowledge when just starting.

Hearing from other students during the welcome sessions provides a foundation for the importance of maintaining communication with peers through the discussion boards and research blogs. Thus, these improvements that also centred student voices helped to lay the groundwork for improved student engagement, which mirrors what educational research has found (Yair, 2000).

Skills, Resources, & Relevance

Challenge 1 - Multidisciplinary Cohort

Because of the range of disciplines within the visual arts programme, the materials in the course have to cater to any of these disciplines. While there are some elements that can be generalised, each discipline represents a niche with its own terminology and professional nuance. The programme includes concentrations in Photography, Graphic Design, and Fine Arts. Under these concentrations are specialisations in typography, animation, sculpture, painting, printmaking, among others.

Challenge 2 - Unique Goals

With these specialisations, each student comes to the visual arts business procedures course with a set of unique goals. Those goals play out in the course assessments, which is a complete business plan for either a personal visual arts studio or a company that is centred around their visual arts discipline. Because of this uniqueness, it makes it difficult to take a traditional student/teacher approach. Particularly since these creative disciplines have a long history of following the apprenticeship model in order to develop a vocation.

Challenge 3 - Career Longevity

The expense of textbooks can be extremely limiting, with students often having a delayed start on assignments because of the delay caused by a lack of financial aid. Materials and skills in the classroom in fast moving industries can mean that students are up-to-date in the course and already out-of-date by the time they graduate if nothing else is done.

As first-generation students, as well as being the "artist of the family", there are also concerns about being able to network for a successful career. This also means that many of the basic skills necessary to run a business need to be taught as part of the course as well. These skills overlap with valuable academic skills, such as timeliness, research, public speaking, communications, and project management and organisation.

Beyond the material on legal and ethical knowledge, there are few limitations to what comprises a successful final assessment. The unique goals and interests of the student shape the way they complete each stage of the assignment. Which is the interaction of the three challenges, relating back to students needing to learn and employ autonomy and confidence over the length of the course. With the importance of learning those skills being part of forming lifelong habits, making them a key element of the course that must be implemented to ensure student success.

Skills, Resources, & Relevance Solutions

Through the redevelopment of the course, stepping back and integrating the student-led approach laid out by Biggs and Tang (2011). Their framework uses a four-step method that encourages students to share their knowledge and experience within a judgement free space. This approach also enables acknowledging students through both the assessments and through individual support (i.e., mentor-mentee relationship dynamics). The discussion boards, research blogs, and other assignments shared in "public" spaces within the course allows for students to shape the course content. By centring the topics that interest themselves, students shared with their peers the most up-to-date information about course topics while they are discovering what they need to know to run a successful professional practice.

Structuring assignments and assessments in this way enables a more individualised access to resources both across and within the disciplines in each cohort. As well as providing an additional layer of critical assessment of materials, as student have to read through more general knowledge about their disciplines in order to compose answers to prompts about what applies to them in their own art discipline. Allowing for a more engaged interaction with the materials by providing summaries and sign-posting peers, while comments and responses acknowledge the value of the resources that their classmates have found. It allows for a creation of community spaces outside of the context of group projects, which can be riddled with problematic communication and workload distribution. Enabling creativity beyond the visual arts mediums that they are used to by developing critical thinking skills through resource curation.

Earlier iterations of the course tried to use group projects to teach the skills of working as a team, but found these were the most often ignored projects as students either were unsure of where to start or assumed non-involvement would allow for points without effort. Communications and connections improved with the discussion boards and research,

improving the depth of engagement for the main/final assessments of the course. Where the group projects were providing the same knowledge, the conversations as smaller groups actually reduces the connectedness that was felt amongst the cohorts. By listening to the stress and concerns felt by the students, the course was able to adapt to a model that was better suited to capacity building to meet students' short- and long-term career goals. This approach also better facilitated a mentor-mentee dynamic, allowing for the structure of the course and teaching to more closely resemble the dynamic that will be present in the visual arts work force.

Meeting Programme Goals

Challenge 1 - Contextualised Learning

While some of the engagement issues were addressed, part of the gap in materials from the transition of the course was a lack of students' work examples. What students needed were tangible examples of student successes, both in the course's context and the need for better connections with tangible examples of visual arts business successes in the real world. As an extension of the personalised learning approach, this component highlights the value of linking student feedback and learning to active resources that would affirm the value of the course materials. In part, this concern is addressed by the knowledge on professional organisation, but there were additional needs to ground the knowledge better in the course.

Challenge 2 – Accreditation

What is required of the course is tied into the accreditation as much as it is tied to student feedback and personalisation. Through the final assessment and skills necessary by the end of the semester, the basic framework of the course provided a foundation while also giving parameters to what could and could not be radically changed.

Challenge 3 - Making Connections

Part of the connections to the working world include how the course materials links with other courses in the overall programme. There was an issue of keeping in touch with students to better support career success. This links back to the accreditation as well, since students need to evidence successful employment as visual artists for the programme to maintain support from the state-level accreditation board.

Meeting Programme Goals Solutions

Using materials and assets that were made available through professional organisations helped to bridge the gap between student and information. Keeping in mind that these outlets would be the most likely to update resources as the job market and various visual arts disciplines shift to meet the needs of society and commercial markets. Resources that are available for these outlets included resume templates, examples of branding guides, marketing materials, and other materials that echoed the assignments that they were asked to complete, showing an understanding of course materials. Mirroring the ability to individualise the learning process discussed earlier, as students could tailor the materials and resources to meet their goals within the course and their longer-term professional goals.

Alongside these publicly available resources, students were also provided examples of successful student projects, as well as assets that had been created for the professional businesses and organisations that I have developed throughout my career. Having tangible examples, and behind-the-scenes information, helps to show that the skills and activities of the course directly relate to starting and running a business. Valuing the time of the student through practical exercises that are beneficial to their careers, while helping them better contextualise the value of those skills at the same time. Moving away from a model of teaching that separates academic activities and practical skills on how to use that knowledge outside of the classroom. In kind, and as many of the students at the school face economic hardship, the course reading materials were curated from Open-Source textbooks made available through university repositories.

Positioning students to think beyond the classroom, allowing students to co-develop information sharing and cultivate peer relationships that can benefit and jumpstart careers. Encouraging professional connections to remain through LinkedIn and their final Exit Portfolio course, which provides a means of connecting with other faculty that is supporting the students throughout their time at Greenville Technical College. Vogler et al. speak to the importance of navigating professional relationships in this way being beneficial to the learning experience (2018). By being able to work with an instructor as client/supervisor/mentor helps to strengthen knowledge in vocational setting, but arguably is valuable in other academic contexts as well.

Limitations

Some limitations present during the redevelopment included the scope of the changes that were requested by students. This included whether the change was possible within the semester. When the final reflections of the semester included additional topics, such as grant writing, it was necessary to wait until the next term.

An unforeseen issue was resistance from the support offered by the tutoring support staff. Despite access to the course materials, the tutors made recommendations without referencing the newly implemented course structure. The confusion and difficulties for the students that resulted found some resolution through some changes discussed within this presentation. However, it is important to note that this might be an issue that other face even with clear and open communication with supporting staff.

Future Directions

More direct integration of student voices may streamline some decisions would be beneficial. While there have been some instances to try out similar approaches in leading seminars while pursuing a PhD, there are restrictions on how flexible the module is as there is the anticipation of gathering feedback at the end of the term to implement it in a future semester. This assessment of generalisability will help to see what value this case study can serve in other courses and disciplines.

Summary/Provisional Conclusions

With the journals providing an ongoing source of student feedback, many of the concerns voiced by students mirror the concern that students expressed through Ballantyne et al.'s review of the topics that need to be covered in official student evaluations (2000). With the

more robust information being provided by the qualitative data provided through the journal entries and final assessment feedback questions.

What students needed were open spaces for communication to be provided through the assessments and additional live sessions. These conversations helped to improve the course by centring the students' needs, highlighting the importance of the materials beyond a simplified restatement of aims and objectives; also allowing for additional lessons around timeliness, communication, professionalism, and how to balance these with being approachable and human.

It is the variations within these conversations that shifted with each group of students that highlight the importance of being flexible in how courses are implemented. For the ease of sharing the adjustments within this case study, the timeline for changes can read as smooth and working on first instance. These are the final iterations that worked across cohorts, with the resources established that allowed for taking a flexible approach.

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