Breaking down barriers between theory and practice: reflections on the use of practice-based approaches to engage students with theory in Contour Design

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East Midlands
‘Left feeling positive about my topic and excited to start writing.’
Overview

- Barriers
- Creative interventions
- Benefits
My background

- Studied Fashion Design
- Fashion practitioner
- Further Education lecturer
- HE Contextual Studies Lecturer
- Own barriers
- Student barriers

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What are the barriers?

- FEAR
- Perceived relevance
- Expectations about A&D courses
- Identify themselves as Designers, not Writers and Researchers
- Prior learning experiences
What is Writing PAD?

- Writing Purposefully in Art & Design:
- ‘Our aim is to encourage and share different approaches to writing by practitioners by offering its member institutions a creative playground in which to reflect upon ‘thinking-through-writing.’

http://www.gold.ac.uk/writing-pad/
East Midlands Writing PAD Centre

• Our Manifesto:
  • 'Linking theory and practice through creative teaching.'

http://writingpad.our.dmu.ac.uk/2015/10/12/our-manifesto-linking-theory-and-practice-through-creative-teaching/
Forming a bridge between theory & practice

Writing PAD Interventions

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Introduction

"How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world." These five words of Anne Frank. Such simple words, yet so profound when we begin to consider our current environmental state and how easy it is to start making a small difference. Beginning your journey as a conscious ethical consumer, however, need only start with your weekly shop, your daily meals and your travel habits. What is more, our ever growing army of environmentally minded consumers and their pioneers have made it tremendously easy to take those first few steps towards making a difference. But, as those "eco-consumers" really mean us from our (self inflicted) critical environmental position? As asserted by Rick Warren in his book, The Ethical Consumer: "When you spend, you vote for the environment."

The very first pioneers of the eco consumer movement espoused two crucial points which proceeded to create a snowball effect that brought us directly to where we are now in the development of ethical action. Firstly, they asserted that we live as a "Consumer Citizen", a culture which is ever growing in affluent societies and their values, the material value and ethics of Consumerism. Rick Warren highlighted the "right to waste"
Contour Degree programme

• Specialised, vocational, intensive
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Barrier</strong></th>
<th><strong>Intervention</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not understanding terminology associated with theory</td>
<td>Using the visual to illustrate key terms</td>
</tr>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Benefit</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Makes the abstract visible: ‘re-thinking learning as a multimodal process’ (Jewitt and Kress 2003: 17)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Visualising Terminology**
Creative interventions: Year 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Barrier</th>
<th>Intervention</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Research and writing for theory assignments can be seen as daunting,</td>
<td>Make seminars more like creative workshops. Visual, tactile activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lonely and irrelevant</td>
<td>incorporating peer learning</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Benefit</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>New connections between theory and practice can be identified: 'having ideas through the process of making’ (Gauntlet 2011: 4)</td>
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</tbody>
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[Image of a dissection of a collection]
## Creative interventions: Year 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not knowing where to start with research for theory assignments</td>
<td>A stage by stage interrogation of the topic, using the materials and environment of the studio</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Benefit

- Deeper engagement with the topic
- Forms a bridge into research activities

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### Creative interventions: Year 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Barrier</th>
<th>Intervention</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not knowing where to start with identifying and analysing texts</td>
<td>Using the visual and tactile to make texts concrete</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Using peer learning</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Benefit
- Defuses fears around the use of academic texts
- Highlights links between existing and new knowledge
### Creative interventions: Year 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Barrier</th>
<th>Intervention</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not seeing the way that theory and practice can enrich one another</td>
<td>A visual, tactile workshop where a theme for both studio and theory final assignments is explored and developed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Benefit

New ideas and research directions: ‘Reading and writing are activities which require all the senses, in varying quantities, to make the work truly alive’ (Francis 2009: 101)
## Creative interventions: Year 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Barrier</th>
<th>Intervention</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty in communicating ideas for theory assignments</td>
<td>A mood board to support the essay proposal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Benefit

- Images spark tutorial discussions
- Tutors can better understand student ideas

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**Essay Mood Boards**

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**DE MONTFORT UNIVERSITY LEICESTER**
‘I found the Frame very useful. I will use it again when developing my sketchbook ideas in a more creative direction.’

‘I will use this technique for the development of my essay and further project.’

‘Glad I came – developed more ideas on what I am going to look at. Ideas for further reading. Feeling more confident.’

‘Extremely useful, didn’t realise how many ideas I had.’
Benefits

- A clearer understanding of the link between theory and practice helps students to develop:
  - Creative exploration
  - Collaborative working
  - Reflection
  - Communication
  - Research
  - Critical thinking
  - Employability
Impact across the university and beyond...

• Art, Design & Humanities:
• Design Crafts, Fine Art, Dance...
• Other disciplines:
• Technology
• Biomedical Science
• Undergraduate & Postgraduate:
• Writing in Creative Practice for Researchers
• Writing PAD East Midlands:
• Forum
• Blog [http://writingpad.our.dmu.ac.uk/](http://writingpad.our.dmu.ac.uk/)
Overview

• Barriers
• Creative interventions
• Benefits
• English, F. (2011) *Student Writing and Genre: Reconfiguring Academic Knowledge*, London, Bloomsbury


• Tactile Academia [http://tactileacademia.wordpress.com](http://tactileacademia.wordpress.com)

• Writing PAD [http://writing-pad.org](http://writing-pad.org)
Thanks for listening

Questions?

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